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["YOU ARE WORTHY OF ANYTHING! OH! PLEASANCE, CAN'T YOU LET ME HOPE?" SAID RUPERT CAREW.]

THE LIGHTS OF LINTON.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

FOREST ROYAL was a good six miles from Linton, and the distance seemed much more, for the roads were decidedly bad, which does not mean that they were in need of repair; but only that nature, perhaps, with a view to teaching the villagers economy, had placed as many obstacles as she could between them and the shops of the bustling Bedfordshire town.

It was a customary saying in Forest Royal that there was not a high road within five miles, and that when you weren't going up hill you must be going down, as level ground seemed unknown.

This especially applied to the way to Linton, which is best described as a series of ups and downs, terminating in the descent of a long hill whose steepness was almost alarming, and which was bordered on one side by private houses, and from the top of which you could see the whole of Linton stretched out in a rather smoky panorama before you.

As a rule Forest Royal did not count itself to have much to do with Linton. There was an old-fashioned, rather sleepy Hertfordshire town five miles the other side of the village which the people much preferred; but for one thing they depended entirely on Linton, and this was their forecast of the weather.

When the Linton lights were visible of an evening it was positive the next day would be fine.

This harmless local tradition had flourished so long that it was impossible to trace its origin; but, as a stranger, a foreigner the villagers called him, once observed, the lights were visible so seldom that even the wettest season could not have failed to produce the very scanty number of fine days foretold by this homely oracle.

It was September. Harvest had been early this year and was quite over. Only stubble remained in the fields where so lately the golden corn had waved.

The trees in the park were beginning to show signs of autumn, and Pleasance Lester, as she tripped lightly down the Rectory drive, shivered just a little in spite of the crimson shawl she had twisted gipsy fashion over her head and shoulders.

She had not been born at Forest Royal, but she had come there a little child, and loved every acre of the straggling village, while every cottager in the parish knew and loved the "parson's da'ter."

Unlike the proverbial country clergyman, Mr. Lester was rich; so rich that he had been able to accept the living (!) of Forest Royal with its hundred and fifty pounds a-year, of which he had to pay two-thirds to the patron for the use of the house, which, though everyone called it the Rectory, was yet the private property of the Squires of Forest Royal, and until lately the dower house of their estate.

Pleasance Lester was an only child. Her mother had died before she could remember, and the Rector never spoke of his lost wife. Of aunts, uncles and cousins on her father's side Pleasance possessed a rich supply; on her

mother's she had not a single living relation. Truth to say this trouble her little. She was of opinion if such kindred had been as disagreeable as the Lester tribe, she was a great deal better off without them.

It was an unusually dark night, there was not a star in the sky, the moon was not due to rise till midnight; but as Pleasance sat there she could just discern in the far distance the lights of Linton flashing like some fiery monsters, or as Pleasance always called them, "guiding stars," because and when she and her father had lost their way in a snow-storm, the lights of Linton had steered them safe for home.

"It will be fine to-morrow," decided Miss Lester, who of course believed absolutely in the tradition. "I'm glad of it, as it's Ru's last day. I shouldn't like him to take away a dreary picture of the dear old place, and even I must confess Forest Royal looks awfully gloomy when it's 'wet.'"

"Pleasance!"

The girl started. Someone had stopped beneath the wall. It was impossible to distinguish his features, but she would have known the voice among a thousand. Rupert Carew was the younger son of the late squire of Forest Royal; he had been intimate at the Rectory all through his boyhood. At his father's death he went to live in London, intending to read for the bar; but his tastes were not studious, he was more fitted for an outdoor life, and it had just been arranged for him to go to Australia and invest his slender portion in a share of a sheep-run there.

He was to sail on the morrow, and Pleasance had rejoiced in the appearance of the "lights of Linton," as auguring a fine day for his farewell to his native place. She had not in the least expected to see him to-night. The present Squire, Ru's half-brother, did not favour the Rectory and its inhabitants. His wife, a very fine lady in her own opinion, had tried to patronize Pleasance in a condescending sort of way; and finding the girl declined to become a kind of "humble friend," she had pronounced her unbearably conceited, and forthwith dropped her as much as was possible.

"Whatever brings you here, Ru, to-night? Dad's out; he's gone over to the Harvest Festival at Langley."

"You see," explained Rupert, and his voice had a rich, musical intonation, very winning to the ear, "we made a mistake about the ship's sailing. To catch her at Plymouth I must leave London by the nine o'clock express, so I am going up to-night and shall sleep in town. There's no train early enough to get me there in the morning, unless I got up in the middle of the night; and if I didn't object for myself, Nugent might for his man and horse."

Something like a sigh came from the girl. Rupert Carew had been to her as a brother. She had missed him terribly, even during his short absence in London; how much more would she miss him when the ocean rolled between them?

"I wish you weren't going, Ru," she said, simply. "I'd rather all the other people at the Park went—than you!"

They stood together in the darkness, there was not another house within a quarter of a mile, and passers by were few and far between. They were practically as much alone as though they had been together on a desert island, yet Rupert's voice sank to a lower key.

"It is the leaving you, my darling, I mind most of all. Oh, Pleasance, won't you take back what you said yesterday? My darling, won't you try to love me a little?"

"I love you a great deal," she answered, and the very promptness of her reply must have checked any lingering hope he had; 'if I had had a brother of my own, I couldn't have cared for him more than I do for you. But that is not enough; I don't love you as you want, and—I never shall."

Once more he pleaded. There, alone with her in the darkness, with the lights of Linton gleaming before them in the distance, Rupert Carew made his last appeal.

"I'm not asking you to marry me now," he said simply. "I wouldn't take you to a strange land until I had made a home for you. I only want a little hope to carry with me, just to be able to feel that I may come back in two or three years and claim you. No place will ever be home to me without you, Pleasance. I know you are beautiful enough to marry a far richer man than I shall ever be. If you went into the great world you would have nobles offering you their coronet; but, oh! my darling, my little love, not one of them can care for you as I have done."

"Indeed, Ru," said the girl, simply, "you think too much of me. I am not worthy such love as yours."

"You are worthy of anything," he answered, quickly. "Oh, Pleasance, can't you let me hope?"

"No," she said, gravely, "I can't! I have known you all my life, Ru, and I don't believe people brought up together ever really fall in love. Love would come all at once, in a moment."

"Then it is good-bye?"

"Don't speak like that," urged the girl, sadly. "Ru, dear Ru, forgive me if I have said anything harsh or cold. I do care for you very much. There is nothing in the whole world I would not do for you—save that."

"I shall never quite give up hope while you are Pleasance Lester," he said, simply. "Give my love to the Rector. I should like to have said good-bye to him, but I dare not miss this train. Good-bye, my darling; when you stand here of a night and watch for the lights of Linton, will you remember that at the other side of the world there lives one who will never cease to love you while life lasts?"

He was gone; in the distance Pleasance could hear the sound of wheels, and she knew he must have met the pony-carriage at the Park Lodge and that now he was on his way to Linton.

"He won't meet dad," reflected Miss Lester, "for Langley is too far from the main road. How late it is getting! I do hope that tiresome Mr. Brown has not persuaded dad to stay to supper."

Mr. Brown was the vicar of Langley, a parish about four miles from Forest Royal; he had not been there very long, and was rather a marvel to the rustic mind, so wonderful were his innovations.

To-night was Langley Harvest Festival, and Mr. Lester had gone over to preach for his neighbour out of pure good-will; the reverend stranger being regarded by his clerical acquaintance as somewhat of a firebrand, so that most of them fought shy of him.

Mr. Brown being a professed celebate, Pleasance had not been included in the invitation; she had rather rejoiced at the omission. But as the time wore on and still Mr. Lester did not return, she grew seriously uneasy.

"It's almost ten, Miss Pleasance," said Emily, the staid parlourmaid, as the young lady re-entered the Rectory hall, where the brilliant light from the hanging lamp seemed almost dazzling after her long vigil in the dark. "Won't you have your supper? the master must be staying at Langley for his."

The Lesters had never followed the example of the richer clerics and started a late dinner, the Rector always declared it left no evening for work or pleasure; tea at five and supper at half-past eight was his rule. The Park dinner hour was eight, so that Rupert in his schoolboy days had never found the difference in the domestic customs interfere with his frequent visits to Mr. Lester.

As she stood for a moment in the full light of the hall, Pleasance Lester looked her best—a slight, dreamy-faced girl, with masses of soft brown hair almost an auburn shade; large, lustrous grey eyes fringed with dark lashes; a creamy, colourless skin; and a full, red mouth: no heroine, no saint, only a wilful, loving, wayward, tender-hearted, girl, who hitherto had found life's path very pleasant to her feet, who had never known a trouble until this sudden parting with her childhood's friend.

She wore white, a favourite colour with her on summer evenings.

The Rector of Forest Royal was a rich man, and could afford a handsome allowance for his only child. Pleasance was not exactly extravagant, but she had no idea of the precise value of money; she knew it was always to be had for the asking, whether for her own needs or those of her poorer neighbours.

"I'll wait a bit longer," she said to Emily. "You'd better light the candles in the drawing-room; I don't think I'll stay out of doors any more, it's getting chilly."

The Rectory drawing-room was the prettiest room in the house; there was nothing grand or pretentious about it, but Pleasance and her father had left on it the impress of their daily life; there was nothing too fine for use, and yet a peculiar charm rested on the quaint spot, perhaps because nothing there struck the eyes as new, whatever things had been bought of late years having been chosen carefully to harmonize perfectly with the original furniture. The prevailing feature of the scene was a profusion of ferns in white, china pots, and a luxurious array of cut flowers, for the garden was large and well-cared for, and Pleasance loved to see flowers about her.

The candles were lighted, and the girl threw herself into a low rocking chair by her little work-table; but though she tried she could not settle to her embroidery. She was continually thinking of her father's last words:

"Half-past nine, child, at latest, you'll see me, and most likely sooner, for with all Brown's new choristers and anthems he can't make the service last more than an hour and a half; and old Bess will do the distance easily in forty minutes."

And now it was ten. She had heard the clock in the hall ring out the hour, ten—more than half-an-hour since he had said he should be home at latest.

The Rector was a punctual methodical man; and Pleasance, nervous, and perhaps depressed from her recent interview with Rupert, and her lover-friend's sad farewell, felt uneasy.

"There can't have been an accident," she said, going into the hall when Emily was passing for a moment, "old Bess is as sure-footed as possible."

"Yes, indeed, Miss Pleasance, she's more like a Christian than a brute," agreed Emily. "It's most likely the master has been persuaded to stay to supper at Langley."

Pleasance could not explain to a servant how little given to hospitality was the new Vicar of Langley. She felt strangely uneasy, and yet she could not have told what she feared.

"Hark!" said Emily, cheerfully, "there's the pony-carriage. I can hear the wheels; but why has the master gone on to the stables?"

Why, indeed? Never before could Pleasance recollect her father not coming first to her after an absence, however short.

"I'll run round and tell the Rector you're waiting supper, Miss Pleasance," said the maid, thoughtfully; "and do go and sit down, miss, you are looking quite white and tired."

Pleasance almost mechanically turned into the dining-room, where supper had been ready more than an hour.

The lamp shone on the fine damask and delicate china. The dainty cold chicken and lobster salad looked tempting even to an anchorite; but, though she had tasted nothing since tea, Pleasance was not hungry, and had no thought of food.

She only looked at the table to see that all was in readiness for her father. Five minutes she waited, ten, and he came not; something must surely be the matter. Could Bess have lost a shoe and hurt her foot?

The Rector, who loved the old mare almost as a humble friend, would certainly have lingered to see that all proper care was taken of her.

Bewildered and anxious, Pleasance went downstairs to the kitchen, preferring to gain information there to walking round the house to the stables.

She never quite forgot the scene which met her. Cook was sitting on a chair in one corner, with her apron thrown over her head; the two younger servants were shivering with fright; and Emily, who alone retained her self-possession, was scolding them all.

"It'll be time enough to cry when Fred gets back with the doctor, and we know the worst. You'd better think of Miss Pleasance now, and who's to break it to her."

"To break what, Emily?" said the girl, coming forward. "What is the matter? Has anything—" her face blanched at the thought—"happened to my father?"

"We don't know quite, miss," answered Emily; "but he seems to have fainted or something. Old Bess must have brought the carriage home by herself, and when she got to the stable Fred found the master lying quite unconscious at the bottom of the trap. He called up the gardeners, and then went off for the doctor. They'll be bringing the master in, miss, only they wanted us to break it to you first."

It was no time for reproof. Pleasance knew they had acted for the best, and that the brief delay in telling her the evil news had been caused by honest grief, not carelessness; but she fixed her beautiful eyes full on Emily's face, and said, eagerly,—

"Let them bring him into the study. I will go and see that all is ready."

Five minutes more and she knelt by the Rector's side. His ice cold hands clasped in her warm ones. Cook, who had recovered her composure, tried hard to insert brandy between the close-shut teeth, but all in vain, and at last both she and Pleasance had to desist from their efforts and wait for the doctor.

He lived three miles off, and really he came very quickly, though it seemed hours to those anxious watchers. He placed one hand on Mr. Lester's heart, and then put his finger on his pulse. The servants understood the grave look on his kind old face; but Pleasance never even guessed the truth.

"He must have fainted, Dr. Monkton," she said, rather impatiently. "He has lain like this ever since they found him. Why don't you try to restore him?"

The old man knew her well. She had been his patient in all her childish disorders, and they had met often at the sick beds of the poor. He felt instinctively it was best to tell her the simple truth, there was no use in trying to "break" such a grief as that.

"My dear child," he said, gently, "I can do nothing for your father, he is past all earthly aid."

"Not dead?" cried Pleasance, brokenly. "Oh, not that!"

"It was a painless death," repeated Dr. Gray, "and he was prepared. Those two things must comfort you."

"But dad wasn't ill," persisted Pleasance, "and he wasn't old. Only fifty-nine, and that is not old."

"My dear Pleasance, he suffered from heart disease, and I always feared his end would be sudden. It must have been an instantaneous death from failure of the heart's action. No pain, no suspense or apprehension, only just a peaceful parting of soul and body. My dear child, there are many who would be thankful for such an end as that."

But Pleasance was not listening to him; as soon as she had taken in the terrible truth a merciful unconsciousness seized her—she fell at the doctor's feet, to all appearance as beyond his aid as her dead father.

But Dr. Gray knew it was only a swoon. He told Emily to put her young lady to bed and give her a composing draught—which he mixed himself.

"She will sleep for hours after this," he said, gravely, "and sleep will be her best friend now."

CHAPTER II.

It was the morning after the Rector's death. Pleasance still lay upstairs in the deep sleep produced by the narcotic, and Dr. Gray, who had ridden over before breakfast to inquire after her, was talking to cook in a little room at the back of the study, where Mr. Lester had been wont to dispense simple old-fashioned remedies and "kitchen physic" to his poorer parishioners.

Cook's eyes were red with weeping. There was no selfishness in her grief. She had had good wages for many years, and but for sheer love of her master and Miss Pleasance, could have "retired" on her savings long ago.

She was a little pleased at being taken into consultation by the doctor; but her heart was sore for her young lady.

"No, sir," she said, in reply to a question from Dr. Gray, "the master had two brothers and three sisters, every one of 'em married and with children; but Miss Pleasance, she never seemed to get on with any of her relations, and I am certain they'd none of 'em be a comfort to her now."

"If old Mrs. Carew were alive she would not lack friends; but Lady Julia——"

"Lady Julia's a tartar!" said cook, more frankly than respectfully. "She and the new squire never favoured my master nor Miss Pleasance. They'd be no use now."

"But my good Mrs. Bond," said the poor doctor, fairly at his wit's end, "someone must come here. Let alone the funeral, to which all the family must be asked, some one ought to come at once. A young lady of twenty can't be left alone at such a time."

Cook shook her head.

"It's not for me to speak against the master's relations, sir; but I've seen 'em all, and I never could abide one of 'em. I'm sure it's a blessing for poor Miss Pleasance that her pa was a rich man, and she won't need a shilling from his family."

"Mr. Lester's elder brother is a surgeon, I believe," said Dr. Grey, with a natural leaning to one of his own profession. "Perhaps if he and his wife came——"

"They're the worst of the lot," said cook, who had been behind the scenes. "They stayed here five years ago, and the Rector promised Miss Pleasance he'd never ask 'em again. You see, sir, my master didn't marry till he was hard on forty and this Mrs. David Lester had reckoned on her children having all he had to leave, so it was a bit of a disappointment."

"Had the Rector's wife no relations?"

"I don't know, sir."

"But Miss Pleasance must know."

"I don't think so, sir. The Rector married abroad. He'd just given up a living in London and gone abroad for his health. He was away three years, and when he came back it was as a widower. He never wrote and told one of his family of his wedding or his child's birth. Mrs. David went on finely about it when he turned up with little missie; but of course she'd no right to interfere. Only I've often fancied it was the mystery the master made about his marriage and his wife's history which prevents any of his family from taking to Miss Pleasance."

The doctor felt bewildered; he would have said, never a simpler, kinder man, existed than the later Rector. To hear of this strange secrecy about Lester's marriage bewildered him. Cook looked gratified at the impression her words had made.

"Mr. Vardy was my master's lawyer, sir, and I think he was his closest friend after the old Squire's death. I'm thinking if you could see him and tell him what's happened, he'd see to things for Miss Pleasance."

It would take up two hours of his time; but the old doctor did not grudge this last service to his dead friend. He went over to Linton before his morning round, and was ushered into the lawyer's private office.

"Dead!" exclaimed Mr. Vardy, horror-struck, "you can't mean that Lester's dead! why, I saw him two days ago in perfect health!"

"He's dead, sure enough. I wanted to send for some relations to be with that poor child, but the old cook tells me they would be more pain than comfort to her, and so I thought I'd leave the decision to you."

Robert Vardy looked unusually grave.

"Heaven help Pleasance," he said, sadly. "Dr. Gray, why are good men so terribly careless in business matters? The Rector of Forest Royal was as 'good' as mortal man could be, but he had a morbid horror of thinking of his own end; the consequence is, he has died intestate and left that poor girl at his brother's mercy."

"No will!" cried the doctor, aghast. "Well," recovering himself, "it's not so bad as it might be; a daughter's claim comes before his brother's."

"But Pleasance was not his daughter. Oh, don't look as though you thought me mad, doctor. I have kept his secret for years, but the whole world will have to know it soon."

"Not his daughter." Dr. Gray seemed unable to do more than repeat those words.

"He told me the story within a year of his coming here. It's a sad enough one, though it reflects nothing but honour on him. He was engaged to a girl almost twenty years his junior, and she jilted him for a man who seems to have been an unutterable scoundrel. Well, Lester threw up his living and went abroad. The woman who treated him so cruelly wasn't in his rank, and I don't suppose one of his relations guessed his romance."

"But Pleasance," objected Dr. Grey, "who is she?"

"I'm coming to that. While abroad Mr. Lester fell in with his successful rival, who was picking up a living by gambling, and fleecing young men with more money than brains. His wife was dying of a broken heart and neglect. Charles Lester went to see her; he forgave her her past wrong against him, and promised to befriend her child, the only creature for whose sake she would fain have prolonged her life. The father offered no objection to giving up the baby, and directly after her mother's death the Rector took possession of his ward.

I believe at first he never meant to pass her off as his own child; but when a year later he returned to England, to avoid embarrassing questions he decided on the step. All went well until James Clifford was 'down on his luck,' and thought he could work on Lester's affection for the child to extort money from him. It was then our poor friend consulted me, and I drew up a deed by which he agreed to pay Mr. Clifford two hundred a year, on condition he never came near Forest Royal, and did not reveal the secret of Pleasance's parentage."

"It sounds incredible!"

"It's true enough. The marvel is that, knowing the law would not acknowledge she had any claim on him, he did not long ago secure her future. More than once I urged on him the need to make his will, but he always replied Pleasance was sure to marry young, and there was no hurry."

"And now——"

"And now"—the lawyer shrugged his shoulders—"she can't touch a penny of his fortune; barring her clothes and personal possessions, she is utterly unprovided for."

"But the Lesters must do something; they can't for very shame's sake let the poor child suffer by the Rector's neglect!"

"They will argue that she has robbed them enough already. Then Mr. Lester's fortune of thirty thousand pounds is not much when divided, as it will be, between his brothers and sisters. If all had gone to one of them, the lucky party might have spared a slice for Pleasance, but six thousand pounds won't

seem to one of the five too much for his or her own brood!"

"And who is to tell her?" demanded the village doctor. "Don't ask me to do it, Mr. Vardy, for I tell you plainly, I can't!"

"I expect it will fall on me," replied the lawyer, gravely. "I shall do my best to move the family to provide for her; but I tell you I have not much hope."

Pleasance Lester was sitting in the darkened drawing room when the lawyer and his wife arrived. Mrs. Vardy had been pressed into the service by her husband, because he dreaded the effect of the news on Pleasance. She was a woman who loved all girls for the sake of the one daughter who had lately left her for an Indian home; little doubt that she would show all possible kindness to Pleasance in her terrible grief.

The girl listened as in a dream. The loss of fortune never seemed to trouble her. What wounded her most was to think she had never been really the daughter of the man she had loved as a father.

"You were the daughter of his love, my poor child," said Mrs. Vardy, kindly; "and I am sure it was no lack of affection which made him put off providing for you. My husband will do his utmost to induce the Lesters to resign a part of the Rector's fortune to you!"

"They won't give me a penny piece," said Pleasance, "they always hated me; but what does it matter now I have lost dad? I am too miserable to care if I am rich or poor."

The lawyer pitied her more than one would have expected from his blunt manner.

"Look here, Miss Pleasance, you mustn't let your pride spoil your life. In law I grant you have no claim on the Lesters, but morally you have a claim they ought not to resist. I don't think you would like to see much of them just yet. Will you let my wife take you home to-day? You shall be as quiet as ever you like, and I can fight your battle better with the Rector's family if I know you are safe out of their clutches!"

"Do come with me, dear," urged his wife. "I can't bear to think of leaving you here alone!"

But Pleasance shook her head.

"It's very kind of you to wish it; but I can't bear to leave here till—dad does. When he is in the churchyard I will come to you thankfully."

They had to leave her and go home hoping against hope that the Rector's kinsfolk might prove more generous than was expected.

Pleasance was to have other visitors that afternoon. Lady Julia Carew insisted on seeing the bereaved girl, and questioning her on last night's events. Happily she did not know the wonderful revelation the poor child had just heard.

Her manner to the heiress of thirty thousand pounds was fairly gracious. What it would have been to the penniless daughter of a gambler Pleasance dared not think.

"Of course the squire will take the house off your hands at once," said Lady Julia. "In fact, he will want it for the new rector; he will only appoint some one rich enough to keep up a decent establishment. I suppose you will go to your uncle's?"

Pleasance felt thankful to remember Mrs. Vardy's invitation.

"I shall go to Linton," she said, slowly, "until my plans are settled."

"Linton!" Lady Julia looked astonished. "You have no relations there; it would be far more suitable for you to make your home among your own kindred."

Pleasance let this remark pass unnoticed; my lady went on,—

"Rupert has sailed by this time. I suppose he came to say good-bye to you last night?"

"Yes."

"The best thing in the world for him, this colonial project. He would never have got on in England."

"I don't think he would have got on as a barrister," agreed Pleasance. "He was so fond of a country life and out-door pursuits, it seemed cruel to think of him living in London."

"He could never have lived here," said Lady Julia, tartly. "He was absurd enough to ask the squire to give him the post of bailiff when James died. As if we should have liked a Carew in an inferior position! Besides, my husband does not wish to be quite ousted from the people's favour by his fascinating brother."

She spoke rather bitterly. She was not an agreeable woman; but two things in her life had disappointed her greatly. One was, to feel that tenants, villagers, and county neighbours all preferred the impecunious step-brother to her husband. The other cut deeper still; it was that, five years married, no heir had come as yet to Forest Royal.

But with Rupert at the antipodes, Nugent would soon win people's hearts, and the heir would come in time if she was patient.

Nugent Carew attended the funeral of his dead father's friend. So did all the notables, both clergy and laity for miles round, while the Rector's family was represented by his two brothers and three sisters, each of whom brought their wedded partner.

When the mourners returned from the grave they filed into the long dining-room, where Pleasance awaited them with Mrs. Vardy at her side.

Very briefly the lawyer announced that his client had left no will, and the young lady known as "Miss Lester," being only his adopted daughter, could, therefore, take nothing of his property.

"But," went on Mr. Vardy, who rather hoped to shame the relations into making a provision for Pleasance by broaching the subject among such a gathering, "everyone knows the Rector's intention was to leave her his whole fortune. I hope, therefore, those who by an accident inherit it will contribute something for the support of the young lady who has lost at one stroke father, home, and wealth."

"Not a penny," said Mrs. David Lester, decidedly, forgetting the matter rested with her husband. "The girl has been spoilt from her cradle, and it will do her good to work honestly for her bread."

"I think our family have suffered enough through poor Charles's infatuation," said Frank Lester, scornfully. "Why, counting the income paid to her worthless father, the girl must have cost thousands of pounds."

The Rector's sisters were not much more generous. The eldest declared that "pride must have a fall," and for her part she had always felt a judgment must come to Charles for his idolatrous worship of the chit.

The next sister suggested Pleasance should be trained for a hospital nurse, and offered, positively offered, to defray half the cost; while the third said she needed a governess for her younger children, and should be happy to give the post to her brother's adopted daughter if she would be satisfied with a comfortable home and no salary.

The girl rose to her feet with flashing eyes. She cried passionately,—

"I would not sue to you for alms if I were starving. I would die of hunger rather than accept your charity. I may be alone in the world, but I would rather be a kitchen-maid than a dependent on your generosity."

"A very honest calling," said Mrs. David Lester, sarcastically; "but I should have thought you would have aspired to something better. Perhaps, though, considering your mother's antecedents——"

"Silence!" thundered an unexpected voice, and a man, who had stood disregarded at the extreme end of the room, came forward.

He was a stranger to all present. The local people had put him down as a poor relation. The kindred had decided he was a needy parishioner. He was dressed in seedy black, his hair was longer than was the mode in those parts, and there was something in his bearing which struck Mrs. Vardy as theatrical.

As the lawyer's quick eyes caught sight of him he recognised him at once, and decided the list of poor Pleasance Lester's troubles was not complete; for this was certainly her father, James Clifford.

"Silence!" thundered the gambler; and something dramatic in his sudden exclamation really did impress the gathering. "This young lady," he glanced at Pleasance, "is neither defenceless nor alone. Her mother was my dear and honoured wife; and though for her own sake I have suffered my child to reach womanhood a stranger to me, I am here to-day to help her in her hour of need, and to assure her that my humble home, my honest heart are both open to receive her."

In telling Pleasance the story of her parentage, Mr. Vardy had purposely passed over her father's failings as gently as he could in order to spare her feelings. He had represented Mr. Clifford as careless and unfortunate rather than vicious and wicked. He regretted this bitterly now.

At forty-five, in spite of a life of alternate reckless dissipation and bitter poverty, Clifford was still a very handsome man, with a strange charm of manner, which had, perhaps, long years ago, won Charles Lester's promised wife from her allegiance.

Compared to any of the Rector's kinsfolk James Clifford was a most agreeable person, and to a girl's romantic judgment the fact that he had held aloof from her in wealth, and offered her a home in poverty, must appeal strongly.

"My home is yours, Pleasance," said her father, gravely. "The law gives me no control over you, for you are of an age to choose your own walk in life; but you are too young to know the evil of the world, and the shelter of your father's roof, if humble, is not to be despised."

"Pleasance," said Mrs. Vardy, gently, "remember you have promised to come home with me. You shall be to us as our own child for as long as you can be content to stay in Linton."

"A kindly meant offer," said James Clifford, with a bow to the lady; "but still charity, though veiled under the name of hospitality."

Pleasance looked despairingly round the room. Not a week ago she and dad had been so happy there. Now he was resting in the quiet churchyard of the village, and her whole life seemed shaken to its foundations.

She knew Mrs. Vardy would be all kindness, but the poor child shrank from the very sight of everyone she had known in happier days. She who a week ago had been a rich man's only child, in a moderate way an heiress, was now a penniless waif. She thought everyone would begin to patronize her, and she could not bear it.

Linton was too near. She would always be hearing of Forest Royal, of the new Rector, and the changes he introduced. She would have to see the David Lesters carry off the dear familiar furniture of the Rectory to their own home. She would have to be nobody where she had been someone.

James Clifford saw his advantage, and pushed it.

"Come with me," he urged, "if only for a time. I made your mother happy, let me have a chance of comforting her child!"

It was a perversion of the truth, but who was to warn Pleasance how little the handsome, careless ne'er-do-well was to be trusted?

That night, when across the dark starless sky the villagers saw the lights of Linton flash like meteors, the Rectory was deserted by the beautiful girl who had ruled there almost from her babyhood. Pleasance Clifford was on her way to London with her father, and many a weary month would pass before she saw again the oracle of her childhood.

CHAPTER III.

"I AM so hungry!"

The speaker was a little girl of nine or ten,

who leant wearily against a slim black-robed figure. The scene was a poorly-furnished room in one of the cheaper suburbs. There was no fire, though the month was February. Other children played about besides the poor little supplicant, and on a faded couch lay a woman whose thin wasted form told of sickness and suffering.

The child's complaint made her open her eyes and ask feebly—

"Is there nothing in the house, Pleasance?"

"Nothing at all," answered the figure in black, as her fingers moved swiftly to and fro over some coarse white calico she was fashioning into garments. "But I have nearly finished these, and if I take them back to-night I may get some money for them!"

It was Pleasance Clifford, the girl who not six months before had been the sunshine of Forest Royal. Pleasance fallen upon such evil times that plain needlework alone stood between her and starvation. No one near her old home had had a word or line from the Rector's adopted child since she elected to cast in her lot with her father's. She was too proud to tell them of her troubles, too heart-sick now to hope that anyone could help her.

The home to which James Clifford had brought Pleasance was a better one than the miserable lodgings she was in now. She found, to her amazement, her father was by no means alone in the world. He had married again, and his second wife had presented him with five children.

Before Pleasance had been among them a week her eyes were opened; she knew James Clifford was a bad, heartless man, and that he had brought her to his home because her little store of money and trinkets made her a prey worth having; but she did not leave him, because all her heart had gone out in pity to the gentle wife and little helpless children whom he neglected.

Mary Clifford was not a lady. She had been a nursery governess when her pretty face caught Clifford's wandering fancy. Her people had been honest tradesfolk, who cast her off on her marriage with the handsome adventurer. For a little time he kept straight, then relapsed into his old sins, and Mary kept a little school to get bread for her babies. The house was sold up, the furniture seized, and the school relinquished long before Pleasance knew them. When she joined the *ménage*, Mrs. Clifford did plain needlework for a warehouse.

She welcomed the beautiful stranger kindly, but she warned her she had better seek another home.

"I'm not bright enough to be a fit companion for you, dear, and you, a lady born, might get some easy post in a rich family."

But Pleasance had found out two things. Her presence was a slight check on her father's cruel ways, and the faded, sorrowful, mother was slowly dying of an incurable disease. She might linger a year, or even longer, but recovery was impossible. It seemed to Pleasance she was of some use to Mary Clifford and her children. No one else in the wide world wanted her—and so she stayed on.

Every valuable she possessed had long since been parted with. Mary still worked when the pain and weakness would let her, but for the most part Pleasance was the chief bread-winner. Her father had gone off on a long tramp the beginning of the year, and there was no telling when he would be back. Mrs. Clifford did not seem surprised, she seemed used to being deserted when things were unusually bad with her vagrant husband.

"I can bear it better now I have you," she had told Pleasance, wistfully, that very afternoon. "I know you ought not to be here, dear; I ought to have made you go back to your grand friends long ago; but, oh! you are such a comfort, I couldn't think of what was best for you."

The two women kissed each other. Pleasance knew, in spite of hard work and privations, she was happier here than she would have been on sufferance in the David Lesters' wealthy home. She might have tried to find an engagement as daily governess; but the neighbourhood was not one where she could have commanded a high salary. She could not have borne to go away and leave Mary helpless with those little children, so she toiled on.

She was thinner and paler than in the old happy days at Forest Royal; but quite as beautiful.

She had never heard anything of Rupert Carew, the man who had sworn never to forget her — who had declared that while she remained unmarried he should never give up the hope of winning her.

She had written to him once, directly after she left Forest Royal, telling him of the Rector's death and her changed circumstances. He had never even answered her letter; perhaps, Pleasance felt, Ru, who knew London well, had somewhere met her father, and discovered his true character. If so, that quite explained his silence, for the girl felt that no one with an honourable name and position could have anything in common with James Clifford.

"Besides, it is my own fault," the poor girl would think, drearily, "I told him I did not love him. How could I expect him to keep faithful to a girl who had rejected him?"

Poor Pleasance!

She knew the truth now, and what a terrible mistake she had made that September night when she and Ru watched the Lights of Linton from the Rectory wall, and she told him she could never love him.

Adversity teaches many things. Pleasance knew now it was not the care and misery of her life she regretted, not even the fondness of her adopted father she missed most sorely, but Ru's affection—the never-failing sympathy which had always been ready at her call. Not love him? why, she loved him with her heart's best strength; and even now, in hard work and poverty, she could have been quite happy if only she might have hoped that some day Rupert would come back to her. She finished her work to-night quickly, packed up, and put on her hat and jacket.

"I sha'n't be long, Mary," she told her stepmother, whom she always called by her Christian name; "and when I come back there will be plenty of food."

It was quite dark when she went out into the coldness of the February evening, and she knew she would have to walk very fast to reach the warehouse by seven, the hour of closing; but she was wearied out—tea and bread-and-butter, the staple food of the little family, are not very strengthening though stimulating—and Pleasance had an uncomfortable sensation of her legs breaking down about the knee, and the omnibuses and carts in the road all going in circles round her as she tried to hurry on; and then, without the slightest warning, she suddenly turned faint and fell to the ground unconscious.

When she came to herself she was lying on a black horse-hair sofa in the little back parlour of a confectioner's shop, and a gentleman of about thirty was leaning over her, while a young woman with ringlets and a white apron held some smelling-salts to her nose.

"She's coming too, I think, sir," said this person, cheerfully. "Whatever made her faint?"

"Hunger, I fancy," said the young man, bluntly, "and she was carrying a bundle far too heavy for her."

The beautiful eyes opened slowly and wandered round the room.

Leonard Dane said, reassuringly,—

"Your parcel is quite safe, and you will be all right in a few minutes; don't look so terrified."

"I must go at once;" and Pleasance tried to move off the sofa, wondering why her limbs felt so stiff and heavy. "Oh, please tell me is it nearly seven?"

"A quarter past," said Mr. Dane, gravely; "but no one could expect you to be punctual after a fainting fit."

"It isn't that."

The young person with the curls had gone back to the shop, called there by the entrance of a customer. The young doctor took the girl's hand in his to feel her pulse.

"Please don't cry," for he could see the tears welling up into her eyes; "surely the loss of a quarter of an hour can't be such a dreadful matter?"

"I can't get to the warehouse in time now," she said, hopelessly; "they close at seven, and I promised the children some supper."

"Was that enormous parcel work?"

"Yes—shirts."

"But you can't have any children," he said, in a perplexed tone, "you are so young?"

"I? of course not; but I have five little half sisters, and their mother is too ill to work for them."

"What is the matter with her?"

"Cancer. But she is not worse than usual; she has been ill for months."

"Who is attending her?"

"No one," said Pleasance, quietly. "A doctor used to come and order her port wine and jelly, but, you know, he might as well have ordered her a trip to Jerusalem, and he charged half-a crown a visit—so she gave it up."

"Ah," returned Mr. Dane, "very wise; but Miss Clifford, I found out your name by the parcel, I happen to be a doctor, and as I don't charge half-a crown a visit, and never prescribe impossible remedies, won't you let me see your step-mother? I intend to walk home with you, for you are not fit to go alone; so, you see, it can't be out of my way."

"But——"

He looked at her very gravely.

"The dearest friend I ever had died of cancer, and I made a resolution then to show every possible kindness to everyone I met suffering from that terrible complaint. You don't want to try to break my resolution, do you?"

He went into the shop, bidding her rest awhile; but he sent back the young lady with the ringlets, bearing a glass of wine and two sponge cakes, the most nourishing things he could select from the dainties on the counter.

"Law, I'm glad you're better, miss," said this damsel, cordially. "You looked just like death when the doctor brought you in."

"Who is he?" asked Pleasance, absently.

"Mr. Dane, miss. Why, he's a doctor who lives in the big red-brick house round the corner. I've heard say as he don't need ever to have another patient he's so rich, anyways it's certain he's plenty of money; but he's not a bit stuck up with it, and the poor folks round here do swear by him."

It was quite ten minutes before Leonard reappeared; then he shouldered the parcel of shirts, and told Pleasance, cheerfully, his brougham was waiting, and he meant to drive her home.

They did not talk much on the journey. Pleasance was thinking of other days when driving had been her daily lot. Leonard was wondering how best to help her evident poverty without wounding her pride.

But something happened neither of them dreamed of. When Mrs. Clifford saw the stranger, a smile of recognition crossed her thin face, and she cried, joyfully,—

"Why, it's Mr. Leonard."

"You can't be Miss Stacy?" and he looked again at the careworn face; "but yet I think you must be. I little thought when I brought Miss Clifford home to-night I should meet an old friend."

Then he turned to Pleasance so as to include her in the conversation.

"It must be eleven years ago. I was a clumsy, long-legged fellow in my teens when I used to spend my vacations with a married sister, and Mrs. Clifford—she was Miss Stacy then—who was governess to my little nieces,

used to pity my forlorn condition, and have me to tea in the schoolroom. One Christmas I sprained my ankle skating, and she nursed me as if I had been a younger brother."

Mary Clifford smiled.

"I hope Mrs. Rutherford is well, Mr. Dane, and the girls."

"Excellently well. Rutherford got a governorship in some remote colony, and my sister queens it out there as a kind of vicereine. Both the girls are married, and married well."

They talked a little more, then he rose to go.

"Of course you'll let me come and see you, Mrs. Clifford. Your daughter says you are ill, and you must let me look after you for auld lang syne. By the way, Miss Clifford, you said you had some shopping to do, and you looked to me far too tired, so I did it for you. You won't mind, will you?" and I left the parcel in the passage."

He said this as Pleasance went downstairs with him to let him out. He saw her face cloud, and added quickly,—

"Do you know that for two years your step-mother's was the nearest approach to 'home influence' I ever knew? My fashionable sister thought me a burden, I hadn't come into a fortune then. In fact, I might have gone to the dogs headlong for want of a little kindly interest but for Miss Stacy."

"She is very good; and my father has broken her heart. I wonder you don't hate me."

He smiled.

"I am sure you are very good to her. I won't hate you, Miss Clifford, if you'll promise to let me help you take care of her and her children. It's a burden too heavy for your shoulders."

Mrs. Clifford and Pleasance inspected the parcel together—very different "shopping" from what their's would have been—a cold fowl, and some cooked ham cut in wafery slices, a bottle of port wine, and a good large loaf. Probably the doctor had popped into the red-brick house while he left Pleasance at the confectioner's, and made a raid on his own larder, since no one shop would have supplied the collection.

"Don't be vexed, Pleasance," said Mary Clifford, gently, "he meant it kindly."

"I know—but my pride is not conquered yet, Mary."

"My poor child," said the step-mother, "you are quite worn out, Pleasance. I often feel that I am selfish in letting you toil as you do for us."

"You can't help it," said the girl, wilfully, "and I like to do it. Don't you know, Mary, you and the children are all I have in the world?"

"But you must have had many friends who loved you at Forest Royal, dear," said the little woman diffidently, she was half afraid of alluding to Pleasance's past. "I wonder sometimes if there is a sore heart there for you."

"No! oh, no!" said Pleasance, precisely, "the old life is past and done with, I shall never see anyone who made part of it again."

"I thought that of myself until to-night," said Mrs. Clifford. "Leonard Dane seemed like a messenger from my vanished youth."

"You are not old now?"

"I am thirty-two, there are just three years between us. He was seventeen when I knew him first, and our acquaintance lasted two years."

"And then you left his sister?"

"Oh, no! I stayed at Mrs. Rutherford's till I married. They treated Leonard shamefully because he was poor. At last he resolved to accept the offer of his godfather to give him a home in the North of England. We heard, later on, this godfather was going to pay the expenses of his medical studies."

"Wasn't Mrs. Rutherford nice?"

Mary Clifford hesitated.

"She had been very poor, and she married a very rich man of whom she was afraid. She grew in time to think poverty was a sin and to feel positively ashamed of her brother because he was dependent on her husband."

"I wonder if he is married?" said Pleasance, absently. "I think he would be very good to his wife."

Her own heart was with Rupert at the antipodes. She spoke in all unconsciousness that Mr. Dane's entering the holy estate of matrimony could have anything to do with her.

CHAPTER IV.

Charles Lester's brothers and sisters divided the spoil; in other words, the furniture, plate, and plenishings of the dear old Rectory were sold and their price added to the dead man's fortune, which was then divided into five equal shares. None of the lucky recipients remained long at Forest Royal. They were quite conscious they were hated by the whole neighbourhood, and though, of course, the opinion of a few villagers, and one or two country gentry, mattered nothing to them, yet they were glad to get away from the place where their brother and his adopted daughter had been so loved.

Nugent Carew for once acted on his own judgment and set his wife's directions at defiance. He gave the living of Forest Royal to a poor man.

"Greville and I were college chums," he told Julia. "He has fallen on evil days, poor fellow, but I don't see why I should not give him the only bit of preferment which will ever be in my power."

My lady was furious. How was a man with three children, and not a penny of private means, to keep up an appearance on a hundred and fifty pounds a year and pay house rent?

The Squire explained, his new bailiff being a bachelor, he intended to give Mr. Greville the use of the house which the late bailiff had occupied, rent free. He also observed, if the Grevilles had lived in London on a smaller income, they would get on in the country where things were cheaper, and their own garden would supply them with fruit and vegetables.

Lady Julia felt conquered, but when the new arrivals appeared she was consoled. She could patronize poor meek Mrs. Greville as she had never been able to patronize beautiful Pleasance Lester. The new Rectory would be in utter dependence on her great house, and that would suit her love of power.

She never mentioned Pleasance in writing to her brother-in-law. Nugent was a very bad correspondent, and so Rupert depended on Lady Julia for news of Forest Royal. He did not point-blank ask after Pleasance, for he wished his secret attachment for her not to be guessed by his quick-witted sister-in-law. But at last, when some months had passed, he read in a London paper the appointment of Mr. Greville to the living of Forest Royal.

Then he forgot reticence, prudence, everything, and wrote two letters, one to Pleasance, full of the most passionate love and sympathy; the other, enclosing it, to his brother, begging him to forward his letter to Miss Lester if she had left the neighbourhood.

The squire wrote back by return mail. He told his brother of Pleasance's strange disappearance, and the wonderful discovery that she had never been the Rector's daughter at all.

"I never cared for the Lesters as you did," he concluded; "but I felt heartily sorry for that poor girl when I saw the man who claimed her as his daughter. If she and Julia had got on better I would have offered her a home till she could make up her mind as to her plans. There is no doubt she would not stay long with her father. He was a good-looking fellow, but he had scoundrel written on every feature. Shall I keep your letter to Pleasance on the chance of our hearing where she is, or would you like me to destroy it? I don't suppose you want it back again."

Poor Rupert felt, when he read the squire's careless lines, that he should like to rush over to England and himself search the world over for Pleasance; but it was impossible. His farm required most constant attention if he was ever to make a good thing of it; and, alas! Pleasance was not 'his.' She herself had told him they could be only friends.

Rupert knew the world well enough to be sure that no man can really help a woman to whom he is neither brother nor betrothed. Fate seemed to have cut him off utterly from all communication with his darling, and yet his honest heart was as entirely hers as though he had been her promised husband.

"If ever I get on," he decided, "I will go home and look for Pleasance. I am working now for her sake, though she may never know it!"

But fate, which thus far had been hard enough on Rupert Carew, did not leave him to work long on his farm at the antipodes. Before the new year was six weeks old, in the height of the Australian summer, most wonderful news came to the young settler, which, though it filled him with real sorrow, yet utterly changed all his prospects.

Nugent Carew was dead. He had been thrown from his horse while hunting, and when he was picked up life was extinct. He left no child, and so Rupert, instead of being a needy "younger son," was the squire of Forest Royal, master of the beautiful old homestead, and of some ten thousand a year.

"In spite of the sad circumstances which have led to it," wrote Mr. Vardy, who was the family lawyer of the Carews, "you must let me congratulate you warmly on your prosperity. The late squire was never popular in the county, and his wife made more enemies than friends. By her husband's will Lady Julia has the use of the Dower House for life, and the sum of ten thousand pounds, for which his life was insured, as there is no charge on the estate to provide for her. As her whole private fortune was settled on herself she is still a very rich woman. I do not think she will decide to live in Hertfordshire as she hates the county, and her husband's tragic death has given it most painful associations for her."

Rupert Carew sold his farm—at a dead loss, but what did that matter to the Squire of Forest Royal?—and sailed for England within a month of hearing the wonderful news.

He reached Plymouth early in April; the exile, which was to have been for years, having lasted barely seven months.

Mr. Vardy was waiting to welcome him, and as it was too late to continue their journey that night the lawyer and his client put up at the George Hotel, Rupert ordering a private sitting-room; for there was much he wanted to hear before he went home the following day.

"Have you ever learned Miss Lester's address?" he asked Mr. Vardy point-blank. "I can't call her by any other name, though I have heard the story of her being only an adopted child?"

Robert Vardy shook his head.

"We have never heard a word of her since she left the Rectory with her father—James Clifford."

"I suppose he *was* her father?"

"Undoubtedly. I had had to arrange terms with him many years before on the Rector's behalf, and I recognised him at once."

"And you think he would illtreat her?"

"I think," said the lawyer, coolly, "he was capable of anything that was bad. I have no doubt he only wanted her for the sake of any money or valuables she might have. When he had stripped her of everything saleable he would probably be anxious to get rid of her."

"And then?"

Robert Vardy shook his head.

"I sometimes think, Mr. Carew, she's dead. You see, poor girl, she had lived at Forest Royal all her life. She had no friends at a distance, and she was terribly proud. If I'm right, Pleasance would suffer anything

rather than ask help from anyone who had known her in her happier days. Either she's toiling hard in a London garret to keep body and soul together, or the struggle's over, and she's safe in her grave."

Rupert looked into the elder man's face with a strange earnestness in his own.

"I mean to find her," he said, slowly. "Ever since she was a little child I loved her. The night before I left England I asked her to be my wife. I mean to find her and ask her again."

Vardy shook his head.

"If she refused you poor when she herself was an heiress, she'll not say 'yes' now that you are rich and she is poor. She is far too proud for that."

"Do you think Lady Julia suppressed any letters?" said Ru, hesitatingly, "she hated Pleasance. I don't believe the girl I loved would have gone away and left me in cruel suspense as to her fate. She had refused to marry me, but she had promised we should always be friends."

"Aye, when she thought herself Charles Lester's daughter."

"I am sure you have some theory about her fate," said Carew, eagerly, "do tell me what it is?"

"You won't like it."

"But let me hear it?"

"I believe James Clifford proved so much worse than anyone expected, that Pleasance parted company with him very soon. She was too ashamed of having such a father to come to us and confess how he had treated her, and so she remained in London, living from hand to mouth. I am certain if she had taken any situation needing references she would have applied to my wife to speak for her. I need not tell you, Mr. Carew, how badly paid, how terribly hard worked are the employées of such people as do not require references."

Rupert clenched his fist.

"I shall advertise."

"It will be of no use."

"Why not?"

"You may depend upon it people in abject poverty do not spend their money on newspapers; besides, I am quite sure Pleasance would be too proud to answer your advertisement."

"But what am I do?"

"Wait."

"Wait, and do nothing? Enjoy all the luxuries of wealth while she is in poverty? I don't think you know much about me, Mr. Vardy, if you expect me to follow such advice."

The lawyer looked thoughtful.

"There's one thing you might do—I can't advise it—find her father."

"But I've no desire to find him."

"Just so; but he can carry on Pleasance's story a chapter farther than we can; depend upon it, Mr. Carew, James Clifford could find his daughter if you made it worth his while. He'd probably be a kind of perpetual nuisance to you for the rest of his life, that's why I don't advise your applying to him."

But Rupert Carew was like a desperate man ready to catch at a straw, and before he parted from Mr. Vardy the following advertisement was drawn up,—

"Wanted, the address of James Clifford, who, in September last, arrived unexpectedly at Forest Royal, Hertfordshire. A reward of Five Pounds will be paid for Mr. Clifford's present address; and should this meet his eye, he will hear of something to his advantage on applying to Messrs. Vardy Brothers, Solicitors, Linton, Beds."

CHAPTER V.

Leonard Dane did not lose sight of the friend of his boyhood so suddenly thrown by fate in his path; he seemed resolved to repay Mary Clifford's children the kindness she had shown him years before, and to repay it to the uttermost. He never hurt the poor woman's feelings, he was careful even not to wound Pleasance's proud spirit by too many favours. The shirt-making went on as industriously as ever, for Leonard simply dared not suggest pecuniary help, but he would and did insist on supplying Mrs. Clifford with all kinds of invalid dainties, only regretting that coals and meat, milk and butter could not be offered as easily as hot-house grapes and old port wine. "Our doctor" began to be eagerly welcomed in the shabby lodgings, and the poor girl who had felt herself, till his coming, the sole prop of the poverty-stricken family, could now draw breath and take courage.

She wondered sometimes whether Mr. Dane knew anything of her father, or if, like the fellow-lodgers, he imagined Mrs. Clifford to be a widow; Leonard had paid pretty frequent visits to the invalid before Pleasance was enlightened on this point.

"Could you come for the medicine?" he asked her one April afternoon as he was leaving. "I'm afraid I can't send it till late, and the walk will do you good this lovely day."

Pleasance agreed at once. It was most unlike Mr. Dane to suggest such a thing, for usually he was so careful not to take up her time; but the neatly dressed housekeeper who answered the ring at the bell shortly afterwards, said "the master" wished to speak to her; and then she understood he had taken this means of securing an interview with her free from the presence of the children, who might have in their innocence repeated the doctor's verdict of his patient to their mother.

"Is she worse? Did you want to tell me I must lose her?"

"I have a great deal to say to you," he answered, frankly; "and I think I can say it better here than where we may be disturbed at any moment. Did you ever hear Mrs. Clifford speak of her parents?"

"Never; I thought they were dead."

"The father is dead, but the mother is alive and, for her station, comfortably off. I have been to her and told her of her daughter's state. She is willing to be reconciled, and offers at their mother's death to give a home to the two youngest children."

"That would be something," and Pleasance breathed more easily; "I might manage to keep the others."

"Mrs. Hall made one peculiar condition—she said their father must give up all claim to them. She seems—forgive me—to entertain the strongest possible aversion to Mr. Clifford."

"She need not fear," said Pleasance, a little bitterly, "he would give up all claim to the whole five most thankfully."

Leonard Dane looked at her keenly.

"Do you know where he is?"

"I have no idea. He left us in January; things were very bad, and he said he could get on better free from incumbrances. There was just sixpence in the house when he took himself off, and two of the children were ill."

"Hush!" said Leonard, gently, "he has been a bad husband and father, but do not speak against him now."

"Why not?"

And then he told her how the day before, in a hospital he visited, he had been struck by the name "James Clifford" on one of the beds. He made inquiries of the nurses, and then asked the patient himself whether he was not the man who, years before, had married Mary Stacy.

"He told me he never intended to desert his wife, but he could not bear the sight of her sufferings. He was returning to England in search of her when he was attacked by sudden illness."

"I will go to him at once," said Pleasance, starting up. "Mary is too ill, and the children are not old enough, but he ought not to be left without some of his family going to see him."

"My dear Miss Clifford," said Leonard, very gently, "your going would be of no use. You remember I asked you just now not to speak unkindly of him? He died while I was there yesterday."

Pleasance grew very pale—this man had shown her little kindness, but he was her father. The next moment she had pushed the thought of self aside, and remembered her step-mother.

"Shall we tell Mary? Won't it hurt her?"

"We had better tell her; nothing can really hurt her now, and her mother's promised visit and offer to provide for two of the children may comfort her."

"I am sure it will; and I can work for the other three."

"Won't you let me do it?" asked Leonard Dane, with a grave gentleness. "You and I are strangely alone in the world, Miss Clifford; don't you think we might cast in our lot together, and as their brother I might help you to take care of the little girls?"

There was a death-like silence. Pleasance knew this rich man, this kind-hearted young surgeon was offering to marry her. He must offer it from pity only, for she missed the ring of love in his voice—she who had listened to Rupert Carew's passionate wooing could not be mistaken.

Mr. Dane cared for her as a dear friend—nay, he had a real affection for her—but he was not offering her the love of his life.

The cosy room with the cheerful fire—for the April evenings were chilly—was not more of a contrast to the beautiful Rectory gardens in the darkness, with only the lights of Linton flashing in the distance, than was Leonard Dane's proposal of marriage to Rupert's avowal of love.

"I cannot," said Pleasance, simply, "and you do not want me really. You only wish to marry me out of pity."

He shook his head.

"There you wrong me. I care for you very dearly; I admire and honour you deeply. If—if I have done my loving long ago, why, Miss Clifford, I have guessed the same of you."

The tears had gathered in her lovely eyes as she listened.

"You think we have both missed our ideal happiness, mutual love, and that friendship might take its place."

"Yes," he answered, gently. "There is no woman in the world I respect and honour more than I do you. I would so gladly stand between you and all trouble, and do my best to bear the heavier part of every burden that fell to your share. Do think of it, Pleasance. In a little while, my dear, you will be—save for the children—alone in the world. Don't you think a strong arm would be of use then?"

She shivered.

"It's not only that. I don't love you!" she said, frankly. "I had given away my heart before we ever met."

"And he is dead?"

"Dead to me! with half the globe between us. It was my fault, Mr. Dane. I did not know my own heart, and I let him go out to Australia believing I did not care."

"Listen," said Leonard Dane, gravely. "I am not likely to change. Will you think over this, and give me your answer later on. Only, whatever happens, Pleasance, let us be friends; mine is a very lonely life and I can't afford to lose from it a friendship as sweet and precious as yours."

Pleasance went home. Perhaps Leonard would have been disappointed had he guessed how soon domestic cares and thought for others drove away from the girl's mind the momentous decision she had to make. Very tenderly she broke to her step-mother the news of her widowhood, and her mother's offer of reconciliation. Mary Clifford listened in perfect quietude; she had come so near the bourn of life now that nothing earthly could touch her very nearly.

"The little ones will be safe with mother, and, Pleasance, I know you and Leonard won't desert the others, though they will

owe you everything, you won't let them feel they are a burden."

"You and Leonard!" Had he spoken of his wishes to Mrs. Clifford then? No; for the feeble voice continued: "I can't help seeing how it is, and Pleasance, dear, he is good to the heart's core. You may trust him all in all, and oh! I am so glad he should be happy at last."

She was telling her step-child more than she intended. Pleasance had a ready intellect, and she could piece the threads of the story together. Mr. Dane had "done his loving years before," her step-mother rejoiced that he "should be happy at last." It was plain enough, the youth in his teens and the little nursery governess had once been lovers. Did Mary break a promise to Leonard when she married James Clifford, or had the promise been nipped in the bud by the recollection of the two years difference in their ages on the wrong side?

"He likes me," thought Pleasance as she went to bed that night; "but he only wants to marry me that he may be able to offer a home to Mary's children. Oh! if Gladys were only six or seven years older, how much easier things would be. Dear little Gladys, if we could only put you in a hothouse, and make a woman of you all at once!"

CHAPTER VI.

It was eight months since Rupert Carew returned to England and took possession of his birthplace; for more than half a year people for miles round had wondered who would be the next mistress of Forest Royal. A few of them, who had daughters, thought the squire's delay in settling this important question most negligent; but Rupert cared little for this, he was as great a favourite as ever in his own village, high and low, rich and poor, loved him as they had never been able to love his half-brother; but yet the sharper sighted of Squire Carew's tenants and dependents knew perfectly well that despite his wealth and popularity the new squire was not a happy man.

"Find her!" exclaimed Mr. Vardy when his better half remarked, one day, Rupert Carew would never be happy until he had discovered where Pleasance had hidden herself. "Find Pleasance Clifford! he'll never do that; depend upon it, the poor girl has been dead for months."

"Then I don't believe Forest Royal will ever see a lady at the Park in Rupert Carew's time," returned his lady.

"Oh, I don't know; he's young enough to get over it. To be faithful to the dead is not in man's nature; besides they were not even engaged, Pleasance refused him before he went to Australia."

The hero of this conversation was beginning to lose heart; he had spent money like water in the search, and had discovered nothing, or, what seemed to him next to nothing, he had proved beyond a doubt that James Clifford was dead, had ascertained the name of the hospital where he died, and been informed that during his week's illness there he was never visited by any lady young or old. Rupert, who was but a novice at unravelling mysteries, thought the clue ended here; he never traced James Clifford's career back to see how and where he had parted from Pleasance.

"She must have discovered his character and left him at once. As Vardy said, she could not get any employment which required references, so she must be toiling at the humblest work—perhaps making shirts for some warehouse."

If he had only thought of this sooner he would have been right enough, but Mary Clifford's death had changed her step child's whole life. Pleasance refused Leonard Dane's offer; but when he pleaded, for their mother's sake, to be allowed to help with the education of the little girls, she could not refuse, and so it came about that all five children went to reside with their grandmother at Redford. Mrs. Hall receiving a fixed sum monthly, as Mr. Dane's contribution to their support, and Pleasance found herself once more alone in the world with only herself to think of.

But Leonard Dane, if he had no relations in England, possessed many friends, and one of them, at his recommendation, received Miss Clifford as resident music teacher in her school while old Mrs. Hall, who if not a lady born had a very kindly heart, begged Pleasance to spend the holidays with her.

"I should never have held out against Mary a day," she exclaimed tearfully, "but her father made me. He was a masterful man and never forgave those who thwarted him; but I've no one to consult now, and if you'll only come down from time to time and see how the little ones are getting on I shall be only too pleased to make you welcome."

And now, on a gloomy December afternoon a few days before Christmas, Miss Clifford was going to take old Mrs. Hall at her word and was starting to Redford for her holidays. She had been delayed a good deal in packing, and so reached St. Pancras far later than she had intended.

The platform was thronged with people. All the world and his wife seemed to have made up their minds to travel by the Midland line on this particular afternoon.

Only when she was having her box labelled did it dawn on Pleasance that Redford was not twenty miles from Linton, and that the first part of her journey would take her through scenes that were painfully familiar. She would even have to pass Linton station itself.

"But it will be dark," decided Pleasance, "and if I lean back in my seat no one will see my face; besides, in a big station like Linton no one will remember me: it is more than a year since I left Forest Royal, long enough for anyone to be forgotten."

Mrs. Hendrake's was a very fashionable school, and her music teacher was obliged to be suitably dressed.

The girl's attire was plain to a degree, but it was well made, and perfectly fitting; while if not new, it was many removes from shabbiness.

Pleasance always looked her best in black, and as she passed up and down looking for a vacant seat, the guard himself came obligingly to her assistance.

"The third's all full, miss, you'd better get in here," holding open the door of a first-class. "It'll be all right," he added, seeing her hesitation. "These holiday times we always put people in where we can. I'm going all the way to Redford, and I'll see it's all right at the other end."

The train was on the point of starting. There was no time for further hesitation, Pleasance jumped in, and a minute later they were off, flying onwards through the gathering darkness at the rate of something under fifty miles an hour.

It was the northern express, not stopping at all until Linton, and then not again till Redford, when Pleasance's journey would be over.

Thus far she had the compartment entirely to herself. If only no one got in at Linton, there would be not the slightest fear of her recognition by old acquaintances.

There was a mingled bitter-sweet about this passing so near her old haunts; but Pleasance tried hard not to think of old days, but to occupy her mind with the agreeable fact that Miss Hendrakes meant to raise her salary after the holidays, and that she was rich enough already to be able to take some very pretty presents to Gladys and the little ones.

Leonard Dane was still her staunch friend. He had taken her rejection very simply, and it had in no wise marred their intimacy.

"I daresay you are right," he said, gravely, "perhaps I was an idiot to think a woman could be happy with less than a man's whole heart; but it seemed to me we cared for each other a good deal more than some people who marry. Anyway, we'll be friends always."

And friends they had remained. Pleasance privately believed that Leonard Dane would remain a bachelor now until little Gladys, poor Mary's eldest child, was of marriageable years.

Gladys adored the doctor, so did all her sisters; but Gladys, the only one who resembled their mother, was far away his favourite.

Lost in thought, Pleasance had not heeded the flight of time, until a porter's stentorious voice proclaimed "Linton! Linton!" and looking out cautiously she could see the big, ugly town she had known from childhood, its many lights flashing brightly.

Leaning back once more in her corner, she wondered whether "the lights" were visible at Forest Royal to-night, and whether the new Rector had any children who would sit on the wall in the dark to consult the time-honoured oracle; and then she started, for the door of her compartment was thrown open. A porter ushered in a gentleman and his gladstone, and a strangely familiar voice inquired,—

"Doesn't stop before Redford, does it?"

"No, sir. Thank you, sir;" and the porter banged to the door—leaving Pleasance and Rupert Carew face to face! Was it possible? Could he really have come back to England without her hearing it?

But then Rupert, who had been closing the window, caught sight of her, and the deep joy of his recognition was as very balm to her wounded heart.

"Pleasance! My dear, dear Pleasance; is it possible?"

"I thought you were in Australia?"

"I came home last April, and I have been looking for you ever since. I never quite gave up hope, even though Vardy did his best to persuade me you must be dead."

"I used to wish I was. Oh, Rupert! the last fifteen months have been dreary work. You know, they must have told you, in losing dad I discovered I was not his child!"

"I know, dear. Your own father must have been a poor substitute for Mr. Lester—and he, too, has been taken!"

"And his wife."

"His wife?"

"He had married again. His wife was the kindest woman-friend I ever had. When she died, and their grandmother took the children, I seemed alone in the world for the second time."

"Where are you going now? Oh, Pleasance! as you saw the lights of Linton did you think of me?"

"I am going to spend the Christmas holidays with my little half-sisters, who live with their grandmother at Redford. I am a music teacher now, Rupert, and I earn fifty pounds a year!"

"You have no business to work at all," said he, hotly.

"Oh, nonsense! We must all work, and teaching is better than making shirts; this time last year I was doing that. So you see, Ru, you really must drop my acquaintance. I'm sure the brother of the Squire of Forest Royal is much too grand a person to know a sempstress!"

The words told Rupert a secret. She had not the least idea of the change in his prospects. Well, he would let her remain in ignorance for the present.

"I don't mind about the grandeur. I don't mean to lose sight of you now I have found you!"

"How did you like Australia?"

"Very much; but I like England better, so I sold the farm last February, Pleasance, for less than I gave for it, and started home."

"Wasn't Lady Julia shocked?"

"I did not ask her. I have not seen her lately; she is abroad."

"And how is Forest Royal, Ru? Do you know I often have a longing on me just to see the dear old place. Do tell me all about it!"

"There's not much to tell. The new Rector was a college chum of Nugent's. He offended his family by marrying beneath him, so they would do nothing to help him, and he was starving himself to death in a London curacy. His wife is a good little woman with not much in her. They live at the Bailiff's old house, and have three children. They are rather too poor for comfort, but they seem happy enough."

"And the Rectory?"

"It's been furnished from top to toe, and is supposed to be ready for Lady Julia if ever she settles down as a dowager. I go over there sometimes and watch for the lights of Linton on a dark night!"

"We are close to Redford," said Pleasance, practically. "I almost dreaded meeting anyone I knew, but I am glad to have seen you, Rupert!"

Mr. Carew was quietly collecting his properties as the train stopped.

"I thought you were going farther north?" said Pleasance.

"I am going to Redford," said Ru, quite forgetting the friends some fifty miles farther who were expecting him. "I shall put up at the Midland."

"But——"

He had put her in a fly now and given the man Mrs. Hall's address; then, to the girl's surprise, he sprang in after her.

"Pleasance," he whispered, "I told you while you remained unmarried I should never give up hope. My darling, can't you give me a morsel of comfort after these months of terrible suspense? Pleasance, can't you care for me?"

"I care now," she said, simply. "Oh, Ru, I made a great mistake when I said I had only friendship for you; I knew when I left Forest Royal it was not the loss of father, home or wealth I most regretted, but—you."

"Then it's all right?" said Rupert, simply. "You'll write and tell the school people you can't teach their pupils music any more, and we'll be married as soon as I can get a licence."

"We can't be," said Pleasance, gravely, "it would ruin your prospects, your brother and Lady Julia would never speak to you again."

"My dear," he said, gently, "I would not tell you before lest it should prejudice you against my cause: poor Nugent has been dead nearly a year, that is why I gave up my farm. The home to which I shall take my wife is Forest Royal."

"Rupert!"

"My father knew and loved you, dear; he, at least, would approve my choice. Darling, Forest Royal has never been a true home since my mother died; I think the old charm will return to it when I have you there its mistress."

"But——"

He did not attempt to misunderstand her, he knew she was thinking of James Clifford.

"Dear," he said, gently, "'let the dead past bury its dead.' Everyone knows you and loves you as the Rector's adopted daughter. We will never think of the man whose name you bear, only you must let me help you to befriend his children."

Mrs. Hall was bewildered but pleased; all women, except old maids, delight in assisting to prepare for a wedding.

The Squire of Forest Royal took very few people into his confidence; only, on a bright clear January morning, when he led Pleasance up the aisle of Redford parish church, Leonard Dane was his best man, and Mr. Vardy gave away the bride.

They went for no elaborate foreign tour, their honeymoon was spent at home. Rupert Carew took his wife straight from the church door to Forest Royal, and the long line of servants, drawn up in the hall to welcome their new mistress, rejoiced as they recognized the beautiful girl who had grown up among them; and, leaning on her husband's arm, Pleasance went through the Park to the Rectory, and there, where the ground rose almost like a hillock, they watched together for the lights of Linton.

"It's dreadfully superstitious of me," she admitted, "but, Ru, I should think it a bad omen if we did not see them. Long ago, as a child, when I wanted a fine day I used to come here the night before and watch for the lights."

Ru smiled.

"And now you want to consult them as to the fairness of our married life, the future we are to spend together?"

"Look!"

There before them in the distance stretched the lights of Linton, the oracle Pleasance had come to consult; she gave one sigh of happiness, then slipped her hand into Rupert's and let him lead her home.

* * * * *

Pleasance found her old dream come true, for some eight years later her little sister Gladys was married to Leonard Dane. But before that another generation had sprung into life at Forest Royal: Lester, the heir, a princely boy of seven, and two fair girls with the blue eyes and fair hair which were almost an heirloom among the Carews; bright beautiful children, all three brought up, the Squire says, to believe fully in their mother's oracle—

THE LIGHTS OF LINTON.

HILDRED ELSINORE.

CHAPTER XV.

ONLY those who have waited with haunting anxiety for some letter which might relieve them from some terrible pressure can understand Mr. Elsinore's feelings when once he had posted his appeal to Guy Bertram.

The poor man was by turns in the highest spirits and the most awful depression, according as his hopes and fears prevailed.

He had not said a word to his wife of his attempt, and so the poor woman was utterly bewildered by the sudden changes in his manner.

"I do hope your father's brain is not turning with trouble," she said to Hildred, more kindly than she had spoken to the girl since her return from London.

Hildred, who could not place entire faith in a stranger's generosity, seized on her stepmother's amiable mood to try to ascertain exactly the state of their difficulties.

She loved her father dearly, far better than she had ever been able to love his wife, even in the days when she believed Mrs. Elsinore her own mother; but she knew the Rector had, in homely language, "no head for business," and that his wife would see their exact position far more clearly.

"Are things so very bad, mother?" she asked, stitching away at one of the children's frocks; "are we really poorer than we used to be."

Mrs. Elsinore was quite willing to explain matters, particularly as she knew she had nothing cheerful to say. She was one of those women who delight in being the bearer of evil tidings.

"The value of the living has gone down steadily," she said, quickly. "Talk of its being two hundred a year!—your father hasn't seen more than a hundred and fifty for years. Then the repairs that had to be done to the church after the gale last winter cost forty pounds, and it seems we are liable for that."

"Forty pounds!" and Hildred looked dismayed. "Will father have to pay that?"

"It's paid, worse luck," groaned Mrs. Elsinore. "When we had all that illness in the spring your father said he must have some ready money, and he gave a bill to a man at Chilton, named Sharpe, who advanced him sixty pounds. He paid off the debt on the church, and I suppose we had the use of the other twenty; but it's little good it did us. There's only one thing comforts me: we're not in debt to speak of; there may be a few shillings here and there, but, except Mr. Sharpe, there's nothing a ten-pound note would not clear off."

"And Mr. Sharpe is sixty pounds?"

"Say a hundred, and you'll be nearer the mark," lamented Mrs. Elsinore; "it was eighty to start with, and your father promised to repay it in four quarterly instalments. If he'd only taken the trouble to think, he'd have known he was promising Sharpe half his income. Of course the instalments weren't met. I'm sure I have pinched and scraped, and every penny we could get together has gone into Sharpe's pocket; but he declares that was only interest, and that the eighty pounds still remains, and with fines and renewal comes to nearly a hundred. He came and made a fuss only last month, and your father gave him a bill of sale on the furniture as security. Do you know what that means, Hildred? If we don't satisfy the man he can come here and seize every stick we have. The things may not be worth much"—and the poor woman looked sadly round at her household gods—"but they keep our home together, and without them we couldn't stay here. The scandal of having them seized would be bad enough; but how could we live on in an empty house?"

A hundred pounds! It seemed a terrible amount to Hildred. If it had been ten or even twenty she might have disregarded her father's commands and applied to her aunt; but Hildred knew perfectly such a sum would have been beyond Mrs. Warrington's power. The barrister's income, though improving, was precarious. It came in by fits and starts, while the expenses of his household had to be regularly met. Whatever happened his position must be kept up, and a fair show maintained to the world; besides, just after the long vacation, ready money would be very scarce, and a hundred pounds seemed almost a fortune.

"It's no use crying," said Mrs. Elsinore, not unkindly, but in her usual sharp manner, "the thing's done. To borrow that money was just the worst day's work your father ever did, but to tell him so won't mend it."

To do her justice she never "nagged" at the poor Rector on the score of his financial mistake, and the fifty pounds a year, which was her private property, would gladly have been sacrificed by her could it have freed him from his difficulties.

"But you see, Hildred, I can't get at it; my father tied it up so tight, he was resolved, I suppose, I should always have enough to live on, and so he put it in his will that if I attempted to anticipate it or raise money on it I should forfeit all right to it. And, you see, it isn't like money invested; he left his business to his managing clerk on condition he should pay me fifty pounds a year as long as I lived. Mr. Black was a pretty sharp man, and you may depend upon it he hasn't forgotten the wording of father's will; and if I did try to borrow money he'd stop the payments."

"Aunt Bessie couldn't lend so much," said Hildred, thoughtfully, "and we don't seem to have any other near relations."

"Lending would be no good," groaned Mrs. Elsinore, "for I'm pretty sure we could never repay it. Ah! Hildred, if you had been a sensible girl and married David Gibson he'd have given your father the money rather than see us in such straits."

This conversation did not bring any comfort to poor Hildred. Before that she had felt Mrs. Bertram might possibly send twenty pounds, or even fifty, in response to her father's appeal; but this, it seemed, would be useless, and more it seemed impossible to expect.

There was only one post a day at Little Netherton, the letters being carried by a

rural postman, who walked over from Rusholme, and seldom reached the Rectory till after ten o'clock. When she saw the agony of suspense her father endured as the man's time drew near, Hildred felt thankful the Post Office authorities had not given them two deliveries a day.

From half-past nine Mr. Elsinore grew too restless to settle to anything, and he got to wandering down to the gate to see John Robinson go by, and thus convince himself all chance was over for that day.

The Rectory had very few letters, and so only by this means could Mr. Elsinore be certain that the postman had passed. At first Hildred remonstrated with him; it seemed to her that to stand for over half-an-hour in the biting wind might give her father cold; but when she had once seen how remaining indoors prolonged his suspense she gave up the point, and, whenever her household duties permitted, would follow her father down to the gate and share his vigil.

"He might have written, Hildred," said the poor Rector, one morning when his letter had been gone more than a week; "if he did not mean to help us, he might have sent a line to say so, and save me this miserable suspense.

Hildred felt the same, it would have been kinder "to put them out of their misery;" but perhaps Mr. Bertram did not realize what they were suffering.

"Robinson is just coming, father," she said, cheerfully, "and he has a letter in his hand, perhaps it is for us."

"It may be only a circular," groaned the Rector, as the postman came briskly through the gate.

But the square envelope he delivered to the clergyman was of a quality to which the senders of circulars do not generally aspire, and the monogram "G.B." in black and gold seemed to say that this was really the long-desired letter come at last.

"I feel almost afraid to open it," said the Rector, nervously, "I dare say it is only a refusal—if he had sent money he would have registered it."

"Not if he sent a cheque. Papa, it is you who are prolonging your own suspense now; do open it and let us hear the worst."

The Rector turned into a little rustic arbour, where in summer time his children played; he was trembling so much that he could hardly stand, and sank wearily down on the rough bench, while, with shaking fingers, he tore open the envelope and read the rich man's letter.

"The Bachelor's Club, Piccadilly,
"December 4th.

"My dear Sir,—

"Absence from home has prevented my writing sooner, indeed your letter only reached me this morning, having been forwarded by my housekeeper from Tempest Mere.

"I am grieved indeed to hear of your difficulties, and I fully recognize the claim of your eldest daughter to some portion of her grandmother's wealth. I am only a life tenant of Tempest Mere, and as such am not permitted to alienate any portion of the estate and its revenues; but though I cannot offer Miss Elsinore a fortune, I hope to make some arrangement which will place her and yourself beyond the possibility of monetary troubles. Doubtless your parish duties chain you to Little Netherton so I will not ask you to meet me in London, but I shall go down to Chilton by to-night's mail, and shall hope to drive over to call on you to-morrow afternoon.

"Believe me, dear Sir,
"Yours faithfully,
"Guy Bertram."

Hildred had read the letter over her father's shoulder.

"Papa, he will be here this afternoon, and it's washing day! What will mother say to him?"

But the Rector had been lifted to a train of thought far beyond washing days. There was an unutterable relief stamped on his patient face.

"He would not come all this way just to say he could not help me, would he, Hildred? He must mean to do something for us."

"I think he must. Papa, do tell him about Mr. Sharpe. If only that were paid off we might manage."

"A hundred pounds is a great deal, Dreda. Mr. Bertram would have to be a very generous man to pay all that."

"What will you tell mother?"

"The truth, my dear. No good ever came of concealment."

So Mrs. Elsinore heard of her husband's appeal to his first wife's family, really Mr. Bertram had no connection with poor Lucy Elsinore, but that was how the Rector put it, and that a stranger might be expected to call that afternoon. She did not look on the matter with a hopeful view, but declared the visitor would prove some fidgety man who would reproach them for getting into debt, and give them nothing except a little good advice.

But she rose to the occasion bravely in spite of her incredulity. The washerwoman was ordered to put on a clean apron and be ready to open the door, and the drawing-room and study were treated to a thorough turn-out, beside—oh, rarity in this poverty-stricken household!—a modicum of fire in their rude old-fashioned grates.

"It's very extravagant," lamented the mother, "but your grand relations shan't say I do not do my best to give you a comfortable home, Hildred."

Dinner was a very scrambling meal that day, every trace of it was tidied away by two o'clock; Mrs. Elsinore sat in the drawing-room with her ever heaped-up mending basket; the Rector wandered restlessly from room to room; Martha was preparing the tea tray so that it could be brought in quickly if Mr. Bertram accepted the offer of refreshment. The only unmoved member of the family was Hildred. She knew that their expected visitor must look on them more or less as beggars who would be dependent on his bounty, and the consciousness was gall and wormwood to her. For her father's sake she could but hope that Mr. Bertram might be generous, and yet she knew that his money would humiliate her.

Chilton was a far more important station than Rusholme, being a junction and an important market town. There was an excellent Hotel there where sportsmen sometimes put up in the hunting season. If Mr. Bertram had gone to the "Red Lion," his creature comforts would be well attended to, and he could hire a fly to bring him over the seven miles to Little Netherton.

It was a fine day; Hildred felt thankful for that, she seemed to see in it a good omen for the acquaintance they were to make. Mrs. Elsinore had declared Mr. Bertram would not be there till four, but it wanted a good hour to that time when a short, imperative rap came at the front door, and the little party in the drawing-room gazed inquiringly at each other.

"There were no wheels," cried Mr. Elsinore, "and he wouldn't come on foot."

"It was quite a young man," said Molly, the third girl. "I saw him come up the drive. He was a little like Mr. Jopling."

"Mr. Jopling" was a young surgeon who had been the old doctor's *locum tenens* that summer. He was known to be staying in the neighbourhood, so perhaps he had come over to call. So no one made the least effort to go to the door, and Mrs. Marsh, the charwoman, kept the visitor waiting a prodigious time before she shuffled upstairs. Then she came into the drawing-room with a card in her hand, holding it gingerly between her finger and thumb as though rather afraid of such unusual articles.

"It's a gent," she said, impressively. "I've shut him in the study. He wants to see the minister."

"Mr. Guy Bertram,
Tempest Mere."

read Mrs. Elsinore from the card. "Charles, don't keep him waiting."

It would have been difficult to find two more striking contrasts than the Rector and his guest. To the former's surprise, Mr. Bertram proved a young man with a handsome, thoughtful face, dark curling hair, and beautiful, large grey eyes. The eyes had a strange sadness in their depths as though, despite his wealth, the stranger had known trouble; his voice was clear and musical, his manner cordial without even the slightest tinge of patronage. He put out his hand to the Rector cordially.

"I'm sure I wonder you'll receive me at all," he said, simply. "After Lady Tempest's will, you have every right to hate me; but, I assure you, Mr. Elsinore, I exerted no influence over your mother-in-law. I had not seen her for nearly ten years. We parted at daggers drawn, and no one could have been more surprised than myself when she made me her heir."

"She was a strange woman," said the clergyman, sadly. "We offended her by our marriage, and I never applied to her for help. It was only when I heard she was dead, and knew there was no chance of her relenting, that I realised how I had clung to the hope she might do something for Hildred."

"Is Miss Hildred your only child?" asked Mr. Bertram, kindly.

He had put his hat and stick on a chair, and was sitting on the broken-down sofa as much at his ease as though he had never seen anything better.

Guy Bertram possessed a singular charm of manner when he chose to use it; he so chose now, with the result that poor Mr. Elsinore almost forgot his abject poverty and the gulf between it and his visitor's wealth.

"My only child?" he exclaimed. "Bless me, no; I've nine living, and all of them girls."

"That's a pity," said Guy, simply, "because boys are much easier to start in life; but, Mr. Elsinore, one, at any rate, of your girls is provided for. By her grandmother's will, Hildred will inherit Tempest Mere and all the Tempest money at my death."

Mr. Elsinore started.

"She did remember the child, then?"

"She did not mention her. Lady Tempest directed that unless I married and had a son within five years of her own death, her next of kin should take everything on my decease. Now, I've no intention of marrying, so, sooner or later, Miss Hildred will be a great heiress. I can't give her a share now, for I have no power to do so, but I am more than willing to try and make some arrangement by which she may at least be free from poverty."

Mr. Elsinore found himself telling his story to a sympathetic listener. Guy Bertram seemed to take the utmost interest in the tale, and when the Rector had finished, he was ready with a most generous proposal.

"I shall be staying at Chilton some days. I find the huntings very good in this part of the world, and I shall enjoy a little sport. Now, Mr. Elsinore, will you do me a favour? Make a list of your debts, beginning with Mr. Sharpe's hundred pounds, and putting down everything you owe, to the smallest trifle; then I'll send you a cheque for the amount."

The poor clergyman stared.

"Oh, Mr. Bertram! do you mean it?"

The younger man shivered almost, as though he had had a shock.

"There must be something wrong with fortune," he said, slowly, "when I have more money than I need, and you are so sadly short of it. Of course I meant just what I said, Mr. Elsinore; and when the debts are

paid, we must fix some sum for me to pay you annually as a provision for my heiress."

"Please don't call her that," said the Rector; "you are a young man. You will probably live till Hildred is an old woman, and have a son of your own to inherit Tempest Mere."

"I am nearer forty than thirty, and I do not enjoy good health. You must let me have my own way about Miss Hildred. There is another thing I should like to ask about her, if you would not deem it impertinent. Is she engaged to be married?"

"No; she is not quite nineteen, and she is a strange, romantic girl. One of the farmers about here wanted her, but she would not listen to him—said she could never marry without love. Hildred thinks more of her books and music than of lovers."

"Ah!" Mr. Bertram looked relieved, "I am glad to hear it. You see, sir, Lady Tempest's will was made public. All who know me are aware of my aversion to matrimony, and of my indifferent health. They must know perfectly that in a few years your daughter will be one of the richest women in England. Guard her from fortune-hunters, Mr. Elsinore; keep her safe in the shelter of home, or her grandmother's money may yet be her curse."

The Rector was much impressed.

"The child spent three months in London this summer, but at home she sees no strangers from one year's end to another."

"I knew she had been in London," said Guy Bertram, gravely; "she stayed with a Mr. Warrington in West Kensington."

"Whoever told you?" asked the bewildered father, a little pleased that his child's doings had travelled so far.

"An acquaintance of my own—a fast, reckless man of fashion who is looking for an heiress to repair his broken fortunes. Men don't mind much what they say to each other, and he actually told me that if I would make haste and depart this life, he would 'go in' for Miss Elsinore to-morrow. So be warned by me," went on the young man, solemnly, "keep your child safe within the shelter of home, and don't let her become a prey for heartless adventurers."

He had risen to go, but Mr. Elsinore could not let his benefactor depart without some proffer of hospitality. Tea was mentioned, and Guy declared he preferred it to all else, so he was taken into the drawing-room and presented to Hildred and her step-mother; he greeted the matron with perfect cordiality, but a strange sadness crossed his face as he looked at Hildred.

"Miss Elsinore, I could almost believe the grave had given up its dead," he said, simply. "You are the image of your aunt."

"Hildred is like her mother," said the Rector. "I have almost forgotten Blanche; she died quite young, I have heard."

"She died seven years ago," said Bertram, gazing at the girl's beautiful face with strange intensity. "She was to have been my wife; but I was poor, and her mother sent me away. I was to win a fortune before she consented to accept me as a son-in-law. Alas! before the fortune was made the prize it would have won was gone. My darling died of a broken heart, and long years afterwards Lady Tempest left me her wealth as a poor attempt at consolation."

He did not linger long, and, when he had left, the Rector told his wife and girls of Mr. Bertram's wonderful generosity: the debts were to be paid in full, and a fresh start given him.

The tears stood in Mrs. Elsinore's eyes. She was a woman whom happiness softened.

"Heaven bless him!" she said, fervently. "Charles, he must be a good young man."

"And a charming one," echoed the Rector. "My heart went out to him at once."

"He never seemed to notice the cups were cracked, and the bread a little stale," said Martha. "He seemed quite to enjoy his tea."

And the one voice not raised in his praise was Hildred's, the girl for whose sake Guy had come to the Rectory, about whose future he had seemed so anxious.

Hildred was grateful for his generosity; but she did not like him, she felt ready to shiver when he fixed those beautiful melancholy eyes upon her.

CHAPTER XVI.

It struck Hugh Trefusis, albeit not a fanciful young man, as strange that after the afternoon of Dr. Tucker's visit his intimacy with Guy Bertram seemed imperceptibly to lessen.

That day he had been admitted, as it were, to the millionaire's most sacred confidence, had heard the story of Guy's false friend, and the reason of his aversion to matrimony. There was not the slightest quarrel between them, not even the most trifling disagreement; only from that night they seemed to drift apart.

The next time Captain Trefusis went to the Mere he found Mr. Bertram out; the latter declined an invitation to dine at the mess; and then, without a word of his intentions to any of his acquaintance, went up to London on business.

He came down on several occasions for a night or two, and on these occasions he and Hugh generally met; but for the latter the charm of the friendship was gone.

Always quiet, Mr. Bertram now seemed gloomy and pre-occupied. He declared he had a great deal to occupy him in London, and it was quite impossible for him to tell when he should be able again to settle at the Mere.

"I think," Mrs. Smith said to Captain Trefusis one day, when they met and he remarked on Mr. Bertram's protracted absence, "we were not quite humble enough. The millionaire did not receive as much flattery as he expected."

"Oh, come now," cried Trefusis, eager to defend the absent, "he wasn't that sort of fellow. I expect, Mrs. Smith, the truth is he couldn't stand that great empty house. I am sure it would give me the blues to live there by myself."

The clergyman's wife looked gravely on the floor in silence; somehow that silence rather irritated Captain Trefusis.

"I know you never liked Bertram," he said, warmly; "but for the life of me I can't make out why. It's not like you to take up an unfounded prejudice, and I'm sure he never gave you real cause for it."

Mrs. Smith smiled.

"I do like to hear you stand up for him," she said, admiringly, "you are such a staunch friend."

"Well. Do tell me why you dislike him?"

The lady hesitated; but Captain Trefusis saw his advantage, and pursued it.

"It would be so much fairer to tell me, and I'm sure you are a generous foe, Mrs. Smith. I know a lot about Bertram's past, and perhaps I could set right any idle gossip you have heard of him."

"But I haven't heard a word. Captain Trefusis, my husband is perfectly infatuated with Mr. Bertram—he won't hear a word against him; but I can't like the Squire, though I have tried my utmost, and if only anyone could see him from my point of view they'd understand."

"Well, I am quite ready to hear 'your point of view,' Mrs. Smith," said Hugh, "so please begin. I don't promise to hate Bertram from this time forward, but I am sure it would be fairer that a friend of his should hear your objections and try to refute them."

"Do you know, Mr. Smith says I could be put in prison?" said the lady, demurely; "he begged me not to drop a word of my opinion lest I should be taken up for libel and slander."

"I can keep a secret," he said, pleasantly; "and you have promised to trust me."

"Well, then, I don't believe that man is Guy Bertram at all."

They had met in a pleasant country lane, not far from the Vicarage. There were no passers-by. The chances were they could not have been so utterly alone and undisturbed in any room at Mrs. Smith's house.

Hugh Trefusis planted his back firmly against a tree, and stared at the lady almost, it seemed to her, as though he could not leave off.

"Please don't look at me like that," she said, nervously. "I'd much rather you reproached me as the most uncharitable woman you ever met. I could bear that a great deal better than being stared at."

Trefusis removed his eyes by an effort.

"You have taken my breath away," he said, simply; "will you tell me your reasons—I suppose you have some?"

"Oh, yes, I have plenty. First of all, Guy Bertram never mentions his past life."

"We all know it," interrupted Trefusis, "he was Blanche Tempest's lover, and——"

"Bah!" returned Mrs. Smith, "that's ten years ago. What has he been doing ever since? Why does he never say a word about the years which have passed since Blanche's death? Why do none of the people he knew in them come here? Captain Trefusis, your friend tries to draw a veil of mystery over his life from the year he sailed for Sydney till he came here a millionaire."

"Oh, no!" cried Trefusis, glad to be able to contradict her. "He's often spoken to me of his Australian experiences."

"And since," demanded his antagonist, "his means were very slender, how did he eke them out on his return to England? Where are his friends and acquaintances? Why don't they come to see him?"

"Williams and West were Lady Tempest's lawyers. They are one of the shrewdest firms in London. They couldn't have been mistaken in the man."

"They had never seen Guy Bertram," returned Mrs. Smith. "They offered fifty pounds for his address. As far as I can make out no living creature came forward to identify this man as Blanche Tempest's lover. He had her picture and letters in his possession, and that was counted proof."

"If he is not Guy Bertram he has committed a terrible fraud," said Trefusis; "but I am positive you are mistaken."

"Blanche Tempest often spoke of her lover to me. She declared he was the handsomest, bravest man she had ever seen, and that he was so tall she could hardly reach to take his arm. The present Guy Bertram is five feet nine. I asked him one day myself."

Trefusis looked uneasy. He knew that the very shortest of women would have had no difficulty in taking his friend's arm, and that a man's height is not altered by time or climate.

"She may have exaggerated," he said, lamely, "from very love she may have magnified his attractions."

"She may," said Mrs. Smith, drily. "I was reading one of her letters last night, it was written to me from London at the time of her engagement to Mr. Bertram—before her lady mother had decided he was too poor—and there is a full description of her lover. After referring to his being the "tallest man in town," she goes on to speak of his dark eyes and straight black hair. We were girls together, and we had both a great admiration for curly hair; and she put in a postscript: 'When you see him you must admire my knight, even though he has straight hair.'"

Captain Trefusis looked bothered, he almost wished he had not persuaded Mrs. Smith to repose her confidence in him.

"Of course, Bertram's eyes are grey," he said, slowly, "and glorious eyes they are too—but does that prove anything? Miss Tempest may have been mistaken."

Mrs. Smith smiled.

[THE RECTOR SANK WEARILY DOWN ON THE ROUGH BENCH, AND READ THE RICH MAN'S LETTER.]

"A girl does not make a mistake when she is describing her lover. I will tell you something else, Captain Trefusis: in spite of her mother's anger Blanche always regarded herself as Guy Bertram's future wife; she wore his ring until I took it from her dead finger and sent it him, in accordance with her dying wish that he should have it and wear it for her sake. . . . I said to your Mr. Bertram the other day, 'Do you never wear pearls?' and he stared at me as though he had no idea what I meant."

"I have just been to the Mere," said Trefusis; "they have no idea when he is expected home, all his letters are forwarded to his club, and they don't know if he will be here for Christmas."

"Well, he's not much loss," said Mrs. Smith, frankly: "if he is Guy Bertram he's the most cold-blooded man I ever met; and if he isn't, why, his whole life is one gigantic fraud."

"But it ought to be cleared up," said the Captain. "Don't you see, Mrs. Smith, the doubt once raised must be set at rest? Either he is Guy Bertram, and your suspicions are a cruel insult; or else——"

She looked at him shrewdly.

"Captain Trefusis, do you still think my dislike a 'woman's prejudice'?"

He hesitated.

"You have made me so terribly uncomfortable I don't know what to think," he said, sadly. "If I could get a few days' leave I believe I should run up to London and tell my father everything, I could never look Bertram in the face again, if I did, but I'm tied now till Christmas, and it's not the sort of thing one could write about."

"No, indeed."

"I suppose you wouldn't go? You must know Lady Tempest's lawyers, at least as acquaintances, and they would listen to you."

"No, they wouldn't," she said, promptly, "men hate to feel they've made a mistake; and just think what an awful blunder this would be. Why, Mr. Bertram's spent money right and left; if he was proved an impostor the lawyers might have to make it good."

Trefusis looked grave.

"After all, I believe you are wrong; how could an impostor have Miss Tempest's picture and letters? Besides, the advertisement for Guy Bertram was in the papers a dozen times, the whole world must have seen it. If this is not the right man, why did not the real claimant come forward?"

"He may be dead," said Mrs. Smith, lightly. "There are a good many people who would not wrong a living friend, but who would think it no sin to take a fortune the dead could never claim. How if Guy Bertram lost his life in the Antipodes, leaving all he most valued to his 'friend?' Then, if the latter saw those advertisements, just think of the temptation; he had but to steal a dead man's name and——become a millionaire!"

"Thank goodness Bertram is away, for I couldn't take his hand in friendship; I should feel like a traitor after listening to you, Mrs. Smith. I can't do anything now, but when I'm at home on leave I shall tell my father everything and get his opinion; he knows Williams and West intimately. After all, a little delay can't do any harm; for, if this is a fraud, only a dead man is hurt by it."

"Or a living girl," said Mrs. Smith, quickly. "Surely you know, that failing Guy Bertram everything went to Lady Tempest's next of kin, her grand-child, Hildred Elsinore?"

Trefusis started.

"Hildred Elsinore! a clergyman's daughter? Why, I met her in London this very June, and she's the sweetest girl I ever saw."

"And her father is terribly poor; that girl and her sisters have much to do to get food and clothes, while it may be she is even now the legal owner of Tempest Mere."

"Look here, Mrs. Smith," cried Trefusis, earnestly, "I know Miss Elsinore's uncle intimately, he's one of the cleverest barristers living; when once I can get away from Blankhampton I'll see him. After all, he's a better person to go to than Williams and West, for, of course, he'd like to prove his niece an heiress, while it is to their interest to maintain that their *protégé* is the real man."

The claims of an exacting country would not dispense with Captain Trefusis' services until Christmas Eve. He got to London far too late to think of calling anywhere on business. Of course, Christmas Day itself was sacred to his family, and as it chanced to fall on Friday he could not hope to see Mr. Warrington before Monday. He said nothing to his father of his intentions, but he set off soon after lunch to call at the barrister's chambers.

"Mr. Warrington's gone home, sir," the clerk—who recognized Trefusis as a personal friend rather than a client—explained; "he had some bad news this morning and told me he was too upset to attend to business."

"I want to see him very particularly," said Hugh Trefusis, who had only that week to remain in London; "do you think if I went down to Kensington he could spare me a few minutes? Is Mrs. Warrington at home, my business could be transacted with her?"

"I expect she's pretty well broken down, poor lady," replied the clerk, "for it's her niece who's dead; you may have met her, Sir, for she stayed with Mrs. Warrington all the summer—Miss Elsinore, I mean—they'd no idea there was anything the matter with her even, and this morning the news came that she was dead."

He had only seen her once, he had never spoken a word of love to her, but she was his ideal of all that was good and true in womanhood.

Hugh staggered almost as if he had received a sudden blow, and went out into the winter sunshine feeling as though, for him, all the brightness of the day had departed.

(To be continued.)

["DELIBERATION IS A GOOD QUALITY, ESPECIALLY IN A WOMAN!" SAID MR. MAXWELL, LIGHTLY.]

TWO WOMEN.

CHAPTER IX.

A new happiness stole into Hester's heart after that meeting and explanation with her father's old and trusted friend, it was such a pleasure to feel she might still trust in him and hold him in the light of an ally or a protector whenever she should need one. Mr. Chetwynde expressed some very forcible opinions on Mrs. Monro Campbell's behaviour, and declared his intention of informing her personally of those same opinions without much delay. As for Hester, she made no comment. She had thought herself well acquainted with her step-mother's nature, but it seemed she had yet much to learn concerning it. She had a long earnest talk with Mr. Chetwynde as they walked to and fro in the old garden, followed by Charles Maxwell's dark eyes as he sat trying to make some sort of way with his shy, ugly, awkward *fiancée*.

Hester poured out all her wishes in this moment. There was a directness, a straightforwardness about Mr. Chetwynde that led her to open her heart to him at once. His sincere affection for her dead father was the spell that worked this confidence in one who cultivated reticence almost in her thoughts.

Mr. Chetwynde did not in the least approve of the girl going out into the world to fight and make her way.

"There is absolutely no need for it," he said. "Trefusis left you fairly well provided for, three hundred a year is not a fortune, but it is also not starvation, and I don't think I want any very extensive knowledge of your character to determine that you are of different and better stuff than was unfortunately your poor father. You will neither squander your money nor live an idle foolish life. You will rise in the world."

"Ah!" Hester said, with tears in her eyes and trembling lips, "it hurts me to hear you say hard things of him; he was so dear to me, so very, very dear, Mr. Chetwynde!"

"He was dear to many," the lawyer answered in his blunt fashion, yet with a touch of sorrow in his voice. "I was very fond of Jack Trefusis, and always counted myself his friend. Still, however," Mr. Chetwynde added briskly, "we will not talk over that. Poor chap, his day is over; yours is to begin. I should very much like to bring you in direct communication with your father's family, Miss Hester."

Hester made no immediate reply, they paced a whole length of the garden before she spoke; when she did, it was very quietly and with much thought.

"No, Mr. Chetwynde, I think I would prefer not to do this. I do not see what is to be gained by it. I do not need their help and I would rather not approach them in any way."

Mr Chetwynde looked at her proud face and her proudly carried form; although he had innumerable arguments to bring forward in support of his desire for this arrangement he did not urge a single one. There was a power, a decision in Hester's words; he read her character thoroughly well, and he knew she would not be moved. He could not fail to admire the girl's proud spirit, and, lawyer and old man as he was, he felt it would have been impossible, even to him, to approach a family who had denounced the father so absolutely and apparently so willingly, and refused to extend any recognition to the young mother.

Nevertheless he could not help being disappointed; he knew the Trefusises well, and he was certain of Hester's success with her father's people once she was brought in contact with them. She was so unmistakably a Trefusis herself—she bore in her beautiful young form every characteristic trait of a race of men and women who had, with very few exceptions, taken high and noble places in the world.

Hester was a true scion of an honourable and aristocratic family, and to all these Trefusis qualities was allied a touch of sympathy, a womanliness, a heart that was inherited from her gentle mother, and which Mr. Chetwynde was keen enough to see enhanced the girl's charm and power to an extraordinary extent.

His thoughts were very busy ones as he paced beside his young companion listening to her low, musical voice. He gave the fullest heed to all she said. He saw that, despite her youth, he had to deal with a woman in a certain sense, and not with a romantic, silly school-girl, and he felt his admiration deepen and strengthen immeasurably as he listened to all her wisdom, while he found himself at the same time marvelling not a little at the curious fact that lazy, improvident, and foolish Jack Trefusis should have been the father of such a child as this.

"She is a little queen in her way—brain clear, and strong mind, evenly balanced, courageous, independent, yet as sweet and gentle a nature as any woman could wish to have. What an irony of fate that a gigantic fortune should go to that poor girl," Mr. Chetwynde said to himself as his keen eyes rested for a moment on Leonore Leighton's exceedingly plain and painfully shy face, "and not to this one. In her hands the money would flow to every good purpose, whereas—" Mr. Chetwynde frowned suddenly as his gaze went to Charles Maxwell's graceful figure and handsome foreign-looking face, that had a Mephistophelian air from the distance. He found himself asking Hester a question abruptly.

"What do you think of Sir Charles Maxwell?"

Hester turned her magnificent eyes on the two people sitting in the open window, on the large, awkward figure of the girl, the slim, exquisitely proportioned one of her companion.

"I don't think about him at all," she answered, quietly.

Mr. Chetwynde winced a little.

"That conveys more than you say," he remarked, hastily. His conscience was not very happy on the score of Leonore Leighton. Yet he had fulfilled her father's instructions to the letter. It had been a difficult, almost a ridiculous will to carry out, but he had done all that would have gratified the ambitious heart of the dead publican could he have been alive at this moment. In a few weeks Leonore would be Lady Maxwell, and launched by the aid of her husband's family and her own millions on to the bosom of society's ocean, to jostle and take her place amid the great ships and craft of that ocean.

So far everything had fallen in exactly with the dead man's wishes and instructions, still Mr. Chetwynde had a vague feeling that he would have been glad had Hester conveyed a different expression in her words and voice than she had done. It was a strange thing that a man of his age and experience should be influenced so swiftly by a younger person's character, but it was the case. Hester's individuality of mind and body had made a strong impression on the lawyer. Had the girl been able to say some word in Charles Maxwell's favour it would have gone a long way to soothe his slight uneasiness regarding Leonore's future, just as the undeniable contempt ringing out so clearly in those few words she uttered deepened and intensified it.

He said nothing for a few moments, and Hester was silent too. Her mind had been almost entirely occupied with Leonore during the week that had gone since Mr. Chetwynde and Sir Charles had appeared on the scene.

Hester was troubled and sorrowful on her poor friend's account. With her early and bitter lesson of worldly experience, she let no false hopes or impossible roseate touches creep in to alter the picture of Leonore's future.

Hester's big, mysteriously beautiful eyes had read to the shallow depth of Charles Maxwell's selfish and despicable nature. She had sounded the greater depths of his dissolute and dishonourable character. She had read with scorn, and yet with pain, the true worth of this man, who, before many weeks had gone, would become master of Leonore's fortune and of her pitifully plain person.

Hester was grieved beyond measure at the unexpected events that had arrived to her friend.

She loved Leonore, she knew the full beauty and value of the woman's heart that was set in so uninviting an exterior, and she knew that Charles Maxwell would break that heart as surely and as with little concern as he would set his foot on a common road-stone.

She had gauged him immediately, not that she would have considered herself clever in so doing, for to her straight, clean, honourable mind the man who could act as Charles Maxwell was doing must stand self-condemned before all the world.

It was to Hester a horrible, a degrading thing for any man to permit himself to accept such a position as Sir Charles now held. The girl's blood boiled within her as she read the undisguised dislike, the almost openly expressed repugnance of Leonore's *fiancée* for the woman he was going to make his wife. The volume of unspoken admiration and passion that was written in his eyes for herself had fortunately, for her own peace of mind, not been revealed to Hester. She regarded him so little, she came in direct communication with him so little, she had such unconcealed objection to him, she preferred not to be in his presence more than she could help; and if she thought about him it was all on account of her loving anxiety on Leonore's behalf—an anxiety which grew greater as the days passed, for Hester saw only too clearly, alas! that her unfortunate friend had drifted into a stream of deepest devotion for the man whom she was to marry, that Leonore—inexperienced, simple, guileless, trusting as a child—had accepted this man's attentions as true and sincere, had lost her doubt and the fears that had come in the first unexpected moment of meeting with Charles Maxwell; and in return for his spurious show of glittering charms and fascinations had given him the whole of her big honest heart, her undivided love and faith and adoration, and so had, unfortunately, laid the seeds for the most cruel sufferings that awaited her so surely.

Had Hester not seen this it is more than likely she would have spoken out to Mr. Chetwynde, and that Charles Maxwell's chance of fingering the late Daniel Late's thousands would have become a very remote one; but what use to speak now?

Leonore in her brief dream of happiness, of ecstasy that was so true, so sweet, so incomprehensibly beautiful to her—Leonore herself was the stumbling-block in the pathway of her own salvation; she accepted her fate eagerly—her eyes were blinded, and her usually shrewd brain dulled.

The spirit of her father that had produced the only bright spot in her otherwise opaque mind was clouded altogether by the rush of woman's love that overcame her.

It had needed very little skill on Charles Maxwell's part to dispel the girl's first-born and true doubts which she had expressed almost bluntly to him; and once he had touched Leonore's heart, the task was completed, and he held her body and soul from that day forth until grave should close over her.

Hester, therefore, could do nothing, say nothing; and she spoke truly to Mr. Chetwynde when she said she did not think of Charles Maxwell at all, for she had thrown him out of her thoughts as being altogether beneath the notice of any well-organised or reputable mind.

Mr. Chetwynde turned the conversation on to the subject of Sedgebrooke and its inhabitants. He saw by the girl's face she did not wish to pursue the subject of Sir Charles, and indeed the lawyer was so little prepared to offer any defence to any attack brought against his not very reputable client that he was glad to let the matter drop altogether.

There was nothing to be gained now by discussion, for Leonore's infatuation was as plain revealed to Mr. Chetwynde as to Hester, and this was the only thing that reconciled the guardian to the inevitable, for being a man, and not a woman, he did not see as Hester did the doubly lamentable results that must accrue to his ward from this fact.

"Lady Thurso seems to have won the greatest admiration from the neighbourhood during her triumphal entry to her home yesterday," he said, as Hester and he came to an end of their walk, and seated themselves under the trees to get a good view of the sunset.

"Violet is very lovely," Hester answered, in her beautiful, grave voice.

"She resembles her mother, then?"

"Yes," Hester said; "yet she is more delicate and refined in her beauty than I should imagine Mrs. Campbell ever was."

Mr. Chetwynde leaned back in his chair, and crossed his right leg over his left comfortably.

"It is to be hoped, for Lord Thurso's sake," he said, drily, "that his wife is also a little superior to her mother in nature and character."

He spoke half-questioningly, but Hester was silent. She was looking at the glorious colouring over the summer evening sky—her face was eloquent with the emotions this exquisite picture gave her.

"You are not likely to be *friends*, I suppose, with Lady Thurso?" the lawyer asked in a desultory sort of way.

Hester looked round with a start.

"No," she said in her quiet fashion. She paused, and then added, "I fully expect by this time Lady Thurso has absolutely forgotten my existence."

Mr. Chetwynde nodded his head.

"A butterfly," he said; "well, she will find many of her like in the world of fashion."

"I do not think Violet is a butterfly," Hester said, and she spoke as though she were communing with herself rather than speaking to another. "She is too deliberate in her thoughts."

Charles Maxwell had sauntered up to them unperceived, and now threw himself into a third chair; Leonore had gone indoors.

"A good quality, especially in a woman," he remarked, lightly. "May I venture to ask the subject of your discussion, Miss Trefusis?"

Hester frowned swiftly; but though she despised this man, she was too tactful and too much a gentlewoman to carry her dislike into open declaration.

"We were speaking of Lady Thurso," she answered, her voice grown colder in its tone.

"Ha!" Charles Maxwell said, with a sort of ejaculatory exclamation.

He stooped to pat Miss Graham's old Irish terrier who came to greet Hester affectionately.

"You know Lady Thurso well, Miss Trefusis?"

"She is my step-sister," Hester replied, and she responded warmly to the dog's loving advances.

"Your step-sister!"

There was such an accent of astonishment in surprise, that both Hester and Mr. Chetwynde looked at the speaker; but in an instant Sir Charles had recovered himself.

"What an idiot I am," he said, laughing; "for the moment I thought of Lady Thurso as your sister, and I was going to remark how very unlike you were to one another!"

"You have seen Lady Thurso?" the lawyer said, rather keenly.

"Yesterday, as she drove through the village," Sir Charles answered, very readily. "I thought her a most lovely child. Two young apparently to be a wife. She must be something very infantile surely, Miss Trefusis?"

"Violet is about twenty," said Hester, who was absolutely above and beyond all those little feminine weaknesses and prejudices that preclude telling the truth on certain subjects; "but," she added, "she looks very much younger, she is so fair, her hair is like silken gold!"

"A most poetical description," Mr. Chetwynde observed, with a little laugh. "Really, after that, I have quite a feminine curiosity to see this beautiful young lady."

Sir Charles, who had his eyes fixed in the direction of the house, smiled a faint, rather an inscrutable smile.

"Your curiosity is likely to be satisfied, and immediately, Chetwynde, for, if I am not greatly mistaken, I see her ladyship of Thurso coming towards us at this very moment."

Hester gave a start, and turned her head to look backwards, then she rose from the chair involuntarily, and as she did so her almost perfect form outlined clearly against the radiant evening sky. The dainty, ethereal-looking creature who had been pacing soberly beside Miss Graham's side gave a little cry, and ran fleetly towards her.

"Hester! Hester! there you are at last. It is I—Violet—come to see you. Are you not pleased? I hope you are going to say you are glad to see me dear, dear Hester, for indeed and in truth I am glad to see you!"

CHAPTER X.

VIOLET LADY THURSO had spent a most uncomfortable, not to say miserable, time during the last twenty-four to thirty hours. In the very moment of her triumph, in the very moment of her keenest pleasure—for the first draught of public admiration and reverence was inexpressibly sweet to her inordinate vanity—she had received a shock; a cloud had spread itself over the radiance of her glory; a chill breath had been blown on the warmth of the intoxicating fragrant atmosphere of her new life.

It had been indeed a veritable case of a skeleton at a feast. How she continued the drive onwards to Sedgebrooke she never could have told. By a gigantic effort she overcame the attack of weakness and fear that threatened for a few seconds to prostrate her, and so to overwhelm her with annoyance, for to excite her husband's natural agitation and questionings at such a moment would be, indeed, more than she could endure; and, fortunately, there was so much to attract Thurso's attention at every turn, that beyond remarking his darling had grown very pale, and was probably very tired, the young man saw nothing wrong or strange about her.

As he lifted her down at the big doorway, where Mrs. Campbell stood, handsome and smiling to receive them, the Earl had held the girl's slender form for an instant to his heart.

"I know you are tired out, my dearest," he whispered; "but just a little more of your sweet courage, and then you need not smile once more to-night unless you want to very much!"

Violet was conscious of a decided satisfaction in his strong protecting clasp and tender comforting voice. She was in fact nearer this moment towards really caring for her husband than she had ever been at yet; but it was only cowardice that brought this feeling, and it did not last long, for Violet was in a fever of suspense and agony it might almost be said. Until she knew the truth of her position she scarcely knew how to breathe or move or bear with herself.

"For what purpose was Charles Maxwell come to be so near her? What evil work was he going to do her? He had threatened, and she had laughed at his threats at the time, though afterwards she had not felt so light or so easy in her mind when she remembered him and that foolish miserable time in Paris. But—what had he come for now? At this moment what did he mean to do? What hope had he? What form of punishment had he devised—was it to be simple revenge on her? or gain to himself? or both?

Violet's knowledge of his character and of the world in general speedily led her to conclude it must be the last. Pleading faintness and a headache, which excuse was verified by her sudden pallor and drawn lips, she escaped her mother as quickly as possible, her husband also, and making her way to the room so gorgeously prepared for her, shut to and locked the door; and there alone, her face a strange contrast to her delicate fanciful costume, she paced feverishly to and fro the length of the long old-fashioned apartment, trying to curb her fear, her dread, her furious anger; and to call up all her native cunning, skill, courage and coolness to lead her to meet this expected yet paradoxically unexpected difficulty.

The thought that Maxwell had come into her immediate neighbourhood for any other purpose than to annoy her did not for an instant present itself—as how could it? All the time she had lived at Sedgebrooke she had never seen a sign of him; she had come in contact with no one or nothing who could have given her a clue to such a course of thought.

Two years ago she had made an enemy of this man. She had hurt him in his most vital part; she had touched his vanity; she had made him foolish in his own eyes; she had outwitted him and brought him and his cleverness in the dust at her feet.

He had sworn to make her suffer for this, and although she had laughed recklessly at the time, Violet had always felt a day of reckoning would probably come between this man and herself. But when, how, and in what form she had never sketched out; and, indeed, as time had gone on, and she had drifted out of all touch with her associates of that time in her young but not innocent career, she had allowed herself to grow more secure and more forgetful on this point.

Suddenly, horribly, awfully she had been recalled to her remembrance of him; and on this day—the very day that should have been one of the proudest, most satisfactory to her vain, avaricious soul—lo! she was plunged into an abyss of mental, and, who knew? may be actual difficulty, as she stood face to face with a spectre of her past that was no imaginary phantom, unfortunately, but solid bone and flesh, and that threatened at this moment to upset the whole of her calculations and turn her triumph into everlasting disaster and failure.

No wonder Violet's colour waned and her face grew lined and haggard, for almost the first time in her life she was nonplussed. What should she do? Who could help her in this horrible difficulty—her mother? No; Violet determined her mother must never know the truth of her nature—must never be undeceived in her, not from feelings of affection but from more worldly-wise ones.

She ran over the whole household. For an instant she regretted Hester's absence; she could have used her step-sister admirably, despite the fact that she hated Hester, and knew that Hester, and Hester alone, had something like the real key to her true self. Violet knew also that she could have trusted Hester, and that may be with a little extra skill and cunning she might have made use of her step-sister without that step-sister being aware of the fact. However, Hester was not available, so there was little purpose to be gained in thinking about her.

Lady Thurso sat down in one of the many luxurious chairs scattered about the room, and planted her chin in her hand. She thought deeply for ten minutes.

There was only one person who could help her, and that was her mother's maid. She had no wish to put herself any farther than she already was in the power of this Frenchwoman; but she was given no choice of action, and here, and here alone, could she possibly obtain, first the information, and secondly the aid she required. Once determined she acted swiftly.

She darkened all the windows, unlocked the door, rang her bell, and flung herself in a heap on a couch.

When her own maid came—a big, honest, Englishwoman, whom Thurso had begged her to engage because he preferred his beloved wife not to have a foreign personal attendant—Lady Thurso requested Warren, in a faint voice, to send Mrs. Campbell's maid to her.

"She has seen me in these neuralgia headaches before, and she knows how to treat me for them," her ladyship said, her tone one of acute suffering.

In a few moments Christine was in attendance, all agog for action, and in no wise deceived by "Mamzelle" Violet's illness.

The result was a rapid journey on Christine's part to Helmetstone village.

Thurso, hovering outside his little love's door, which fortunately was too thick to let any sound escape, had his anxiety and impatience appeased by the wily Frenchwoman, who told him fluently in French that miladi had often had these attacks before, and that she, Christine, could cure them with the application of a lotion which she prepared from a celebrated receipt she possessed. Unfortunately the whole of the necessary ingredients were not in the house, but she was just going.

"Let me go, or send a groom on a horse," cried the young man, eagerly.

Christine answered with a smile and a shrug of her shapely shoulders.

"*Mais*, milord is wanted by miladi, and to send one of the grooms—" and here ensued a significant pause, and then Christine announced Lord Thurso to his wife's presence.

"Milord wishes to go into the village, but I tell him, miladi, you desire his presence," she said, conveying the whole situation instantly to Violet.

The girl stretched out her hands with petulant prettiness

"No, Thurso, come—sit with me. I shall be better if you do, and Christine, *dépêchez vous*, do not go to sleep on the road."

Christine disappeared with prolific and voluble protestations of incredible swiftness, and Lord Thurso sat beside the couch content to be allowed to hold one of the small, hot hands in his while Violet shut her eyes and pretended to have sunk into a feverish sleep.

A great pity stirred the man's honest, loving heart, as he sat there assisting at this suffering. Pity and the tolerant sort of protecting tenderness that one lavishes on a child were the predominant characteristics of his love for his wife.

It was not a grand love; he had insensibly changed in his feelings as he was brought into daily, hourly contact with Violet's infantile and butterfly nature.

It was impossible to regard her as a woman. She was a plaything, not a companion; a beautiful toy, not an earnest sojourner on life's way.

Already Thurso knew that he must never look for the fuller development of married happiness, for that closer and deeper communion of soul, for that intercourse of thought which constitutes the real meaning of a real marriage. At least, he told himself the day for this was very far distant, and his lovely Violet must change very much, and grow very staid and mature before she would ever be anything but what she was, a joyous innocent—a dainty, delicious, winsome witch—a sparkling, effervescing embodiment of youth—a something to brighten the house as a ray of sunshine; but, like the ray of sunshine, incapable of penetrating to dark corners or hidden receptacles, or of gladdening those shadowy moments inevitable to all human life, with her brilliant individuality.

Still, he was very happy. He had not married Violet expecting her to be a clever, shrewd, worldly woman; he had fallen in love with her childlike beauty, and he was as much in love with it as ever, and if only he had received his mother's blessing on his marriage, and was at peace with her now, he would have wanted for nothing.

That this was the shadow across his pathway, however, he could not deny; and no one except himself knew how much and how often he thought and devised ways and means to bring his mother and his wife together, and so start a future full of peace and blessing to all.

For it never entered into the young man's head to imagine his mother and his wife would not assimilate. He knew the Dowager Lady Thurso was not a particularly easy woman to manipulate; but he relied on Violet's extraordinary charm of manner, her sweet fresh innocence, and her remarkable beauty to win its way through the most adamantine of natures; and then he told himself that his sister would be enchanted with his girl-wife, and do all she could to help her.

"By Jove! how fond they would grow of one another; Allie would adore her!" he said to himself, as he sat as silent as a mouse beside Violet's couch; while Violet herself lay with closed eyes suffering a very torture of suspense and impatience.

At the very least it would take Christine an hour-and-a-half to get to Helmetstone and back, considering all she had to do; the delicate questioning she had to start naturally and without arousing suspicions, and the things she had to buy at the tiny chemist's shop. Yes! it would be quite an hour-and-a-half, perhaps two, before she got back to Sedgebrooke!

How terribly long the time seemed. Each moment seemed an hour, and the presence of her husband was an added torture; it restrained her; it irritated her, till Violet felt she would have to give vent to her agitation and mental agony by screaming aloud.

Fortunately, after he had sat some time, Thurso stole away. He imagined she was sleeping quietly, and he left her to go and sit with Mrs. Campbell, to whom he had, through

Violet's indisposition, been prevented from exchanging half-a-dozen words.

Mrs. Campbell could not quite understand Violet's illness, and she understood it less when her son-in-law told her most confidently that Christine would be back soon, and then that his darling would be, he hoped, quite well.

The mother was too clever and too staunch to express her surprise and her ignorance of these neuralgic attacks, which, according to Thurso's words, were supposed to have been frequent; but it was a shock to her to find her daughter capable of descending to an untruth, and she was considerably perturbed about the matter.

Not that she gave much deep trouble to it, for, never having doubted Violet, it was not easy to begin now; but she resolved to question Christine carefully, and later on she did so with the most satisfactory result; for Christine was not only an adept but an artist in lies, and she gave her mistress, it is needless to say, the most natural and comprehensible of stories. One that completely set Mrs. Campbell's mind at rest, and made her smile at the mere suggestion of doubting her baby Violet, even for a moment.

The result of Christine's doctoring was so successful that her husband knocked at her door about seven o'clock. Lady Thurso called to him quite gaily to come in, and declared herself perfectly well, and demanded his immediate attention and admiration to the gown she was going to wear.

Violet was apparently in high spirits; a patch of colour burned on either cheek—she looked her loveliest, and Thurso was enchanted.

He held her in his arms and covered her golden hair, and brows, and lips, and eyes, with kisses, the while Violet was in a perfect fever of unrest—a fever of mad anger—and, strangest of all, a fever of something like jealousy.

The news Christine had brought back with her from the village, where the astute Parisienne might have been said to have picked the brains of the entire community of Helmetstone, although it gave Violet intense relief in one sense, had been something like a second blow to her boundless vanity. That Charles Maxwell should not only have learnt to forget her and his revenge, but that he should have acquired his present rank, and be about to make the marriage he was—was something that Violet could neither digest nor forgive.

She would have almost rather have had to realise a dangerous and relentless foe in this man, than to have to confess to herself her power over him had become so much a thing of the past, that he could actually come into her very vicinity without having first traced her to it, but see her pass before him with unconcern, and, coolly indifferent, proceed to betroth himself to, and espouse another woman under her very eyes—this was something Violet could not forgive.

All at once Charles Maxwell assumed a personality in her sight he had never assumed before. Once he had adored her madly, passionately—foolishly! She had been very young at the time, but she had never been too young to lose her head, and she had revelled in the consciousness of her power over one so strong, so evil as this man was.

Even in later days, when she had thought of him, though she had feared him, she had always had this feeling of power—this flattering tribute to her vanity—left to her. It was very hard to realise it was gone, utterly gone.

She questioned Christine again and again, only to get a reiteration of the story that Sir Charles Maxwell was staying at Helmetstone because he was engaged to be married to Miss Leonore Leighton, one of the young ladies at Miss Graham's school; that she was enormously rich, but that Sir Charles was said to be madly in love, and that the marriage would be immediately.

Violet, Lady Thurso, bit her lip furiously as she listened. It seemed to her little less than an insult, that this man who had worshipped her with such a frenzy of passion—who would have been ready to have done anything for her sake—should elect to come in such close proximity to her, and parade his devotion to another woman before all the world.

She told herself that Christine had no doubt been mistaken; that before another day had waned Charles Maxwell would have made sign—have given her some clue to his real attitude. It was incomprehensible to her that a man could possibly forget her so much as to become indifferent! That was beyond her altogether.

As the next day dragged itself to a close, however, and as sundry other things arose to confirm the story the maid had brought, Violet had to confess the unflattering truth to herself, that her power over this man was utterly gone, and that so far from desiring to carry out his threats of revenge he was calmly and unconcernedly leaving her alone while he pursued a very different course of action to any she could have even imagined possible to him.

Violet was in a fever all this day. She went through the duties required of her in a restless impatient way. She was so unlike herself at times that Thurso found himself looking at her anxiously, and then saying the heat and the excitement had been too great for her, and she must be going to be ill.

At dinner, however, Violet was calmer.

"I want you to drive me out this evening, Dick," she said in her pretty commanding fashion.

"And where does your ladyship wish to go, eh?" was the answer given questioningly by her husband, who was only too delighted to do anything to please.

"To Helmetstone. I am going to see poor Hester," was Violet's answer.

Mrs. Campbell frowned suddenly at this; she moved her lips suddenly, but no sound passed through them. She was again mystified by Violet's manner, but she said, all at once, to herself there could be nothing in it; it was a childish whim, that was all; only Mrs. Campbell did not care for any whim that concerned Hester. She feared her step-daughter without in the least understanding her fear.

To herself Violet said as she eat her grapes: "I will go over. I will meet him. I will read the truth out of his eyes. Can he forget when he looks at me? Can he forget all he said, all he suffered, only two years ago? I will put myself beside this woman he is going to make his wife. He shall see the difference between us. He shall recognise my power—he shall—he shall. I swear he shall do this!" and she set her teeth firmly together. "He shall be my enemy, he will, but he shall also love me as he once did. How dare he forget me and treat me like this. I could kill him. I hate him—and yet—yet!——

It was a curious, a dangerous, and an almost inconceivable mood that had come upon Violet; and it was destined to become more dangerous, more incomprehensible, when she stood once again in the presence of that phantom of her past and realised how entirely his allegiance was gone from her and was given to another, and that other none less than the girl she had always feared and hated, her step-sister, Hester Trefusis!

(To be continued.)

The interrogation mark or "point" (?) was originally a "q" and an "o," the latter placed under the former. They were simply the first and last letters of the Latin word "questio." So, too, with the sign of exclamation or interjection (!). In its original purity it was a combination of "I" and "o," the latter underneath as in the question mark. The two stood for "Io," the Latin exclamation for joy. The paragraph mark "¶" is a Greek "p," the initial of the word paragraph. The early printers employed a dagger (†) to show that a word or sentence was objectionable and should be cut out.

A PLAYTHING OF FORTUNE.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"Hush, for Heaven's sake!" Bessie cried, wildly. "You were quite right. It was Brenda Bernstein whom you buried there. This other, this person who lives in me, is not she. Brenda is dead. Dead, I tell you, for all future ages. Dead to the world; dead to the past. If you would do the kindest thing for all concerned that can be done, let her remain so!"

"But——"

"There must be no 'buts' in the matter. There can be none! It is eternally too late now to think of anything else. If you would spare us all the most hideous misery that was ever invented to curse mankind, for the love of Heaven keep silent! There is nothing to do. There is nothing that can be done. It is too late, I tell you, eternally too late!"

Her hands were clasped until the long nails cut the delicate flesh. The grimness of an unflinching yielding to the death agony shone in her eyes. Her breath came irregularly and in little gasps.

Brooke looked from her to Bessie.

"What am I to do?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Nothing," she answered, dully. "It is as she says: it is too late to do anything. We have got to bear it the best we can, she and I. We have got to suffer that others may be spared."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that there is nothing else for it now. The marriage is done; it cannot be undone. Lionel believed her dead, and he belongs by law to someone else. Whatever the justice of the matter may be, the legality of it is another thing. Men do not see as Heaven sees; and now that we are in the meshes of this awful net, we can only remain there and struggle as little as possible. There is no reason why all should suffer because one must."

"But——"

Before Brooke could finish the sentence that would have told Bessie so much, Brenda leaned forward swiftly and caught his hand. She glanced warningly at him—warningly and pleadingly.

"It is as Bessie says," she cried, almost fiercely; "the law must be obeyed. I have no complaint to make. I am willing to bear the burden that I have brought into my own life. I beseech you to keep silent!"

He looked back at Bessie, not knowing what to say—not believing that a woman could be so generous as to afflict her own life with a burden like that for another's sake—not understanding, and afraid to speak.

"You see she is right!" exclaimed Bessie, believing that he looked for her approval: "the only hope is in silence. I came here believing that we would be out of the way of every one, and my belief is that that man Best has recognized her. You must help us to think what we are to do."

"But let me understand first," cried Brooke. "Do you mean that you two are going to live together from this time on?"

"We are!" exclaimed Bessie, fiercely. "If this dear girl can give up everything in life to save my sister from what would be only a grief to her, I can devote my life to Annie and I shall. Whatever her fate may be, I shall share it. We are one in the fortune of earth, let that be what it may."

Brooke was deeply touched. Even yet he did not understand; and still seeing Brenda's warning glance upon him, he turned to Bessie.

"Will you allow me to speak with her for five minutes alone?" he asked. "It is most necessary for us all that I should do so."

"Certainly. Take him to my boudoir, Annie, you will be sure of uninterruption there."

And nothing loath, she led the way.

It was not until the door of the boudoir had closed upon Brenda and Darcy Brooke that they looked at each other.

It would be too difficult a matter to undertake to describe their sensations. There before him was the only woman whom Brooke had ever loved, miraculously raised from the dead! His heart was beating almost to suffocation with joy in the thought, and yet there was his friend, Warrender, to be considered. And Darcy Brooke was a gentleman.

Brenda seemed to understand intuitively the struggle that was going on in his mind, and a violent trembling seized her that she had not the power to control. She lifted her eyes, but they fell beneath his gaze, and she stood there tongue-tied, unable to make any plea in her own defence.

Brooke was the first to break the painful stillness.

"Brenda," he said, gently, "little Brenda, why have you done this thing?"

She raised her eyes and flung out her hands passionately, her tongue loosened.

"Ah! surely you know, and yet you are cruel enough to make me answer you!" she cried, almost fiercely. "I was in the way. He had deserted, disgraced me and my baby. He refused to acknowledge us. He allowed us to be insulted in his very presence. When I pleaded to him he refused to touch me because his father forbid it; refused to touch me—his wife! He listened to his father in silence, while he called me—wanton! I—his wife, the mother of his child! Yet you ask me why!"

"But, child, you did not understand. Lionel loved you."

"Then may the good Father up in Heaven deliver me from such love! What has he not done to me? As my race was cursed in past ages by yours, so he has cursed my life! He has separated me from my child. He has caused me to be driven from my father's door with hatred and loathing. He has made me a wanderer upon the face of the earth, afraid to meet either man or woman, lest I be recognized, looked upon as a thing destitute of virtue and to be shunned by decency. Why, even that girl—no, that angel—down there upon the lawn, who is my one friend in all this great cruel world, believes me a guilty wretch, a mother, yet not a wife, the discarded toy of a man who believes me dead!"

"What? Bessie thinks that?"

"Yes."

"And you have never told her the truth?"

"Never!"

"But she must know. I shall tell her the truth at once. Why should she think a thing like that of you? I tell you she shall not! She——"

There was almost a wildness of passion in his tone; but before he could complete his sentence her young face had lost all its bitterness, and in its place had come an earnest pleading that touched him to the soul. She interrupted him by laying her hand almost fiercely upon his arm.

"You must not!" she cried, hushily. "There is but one thing in all this world that you can do to make my life less hard, and that is to keep silent. Surely you, who are my friend, will not refuse me that!"

"Do you mean to say that you will go down to a real grave with that stain upon you when you can lift it?"

"It is too late to do that now. I must abide by my own fatal mistake. Do you think I would allow that girl to know that her sister is not Lionel Warrender's wife? Do you think I would put that stain upon an innocent life when the fault is all mine? Oh! how little you know me! I am ready and willing to go away anywhere, so that I shall never see, never hear from them again, if you will only promise me that you will be silent!"

"But your child! Have you forgotten him?"

A spasm of absolute anguish contracted her countenance.

"No!" she gasped. "Do you think I ever could forget? But what should I do with him? Take him with me to starve, perhaps? I am not so selfish as that. It is my just punishment for the sin of disobedience, and for the lie I acted in the face of Heaven when I placed my ring upon that dead girl's finger. I must abide by my own choice. Promise me that you will not betray me. It is the only good that you can ever do me."

The utter hopelessness of the tone was horrible. And Darcy Brooke was torn by a thousand conflicting emotions.

His own wild, unreasoning love for her had never seemed so strong as in that hour, yet he was trying with all his soul to control it. He knew not what to do. Could he allow her to curse her life like that? Could he allow Lionel to go on in his own way, living a crime, however innocently, every hour of every day? And yet there was Violet to consider. What of her?

He sat down and covered his face with his hands, and while he sat there striving to think it all out righteously, putting his own love behind him, Brenda knelt beside him to beseech his promise. Her hand touched his shoulder, her breath was upon his cheek.

He forgot everything—forgot his honour, forgot his friend, forgot himself!

He threw his arms about her and strained her passionately to his aching, yearning heart.

"My darling," he cried, hoarsely, "why did not Heaven give you to me? I love you with all my soul! I have always loved you. I have felt sometimes that up there in the spirit world you were looking down upon my great love with pitying tenderness, and it has been such a comfort to me. If you had but been mine, how I should have cherished you! How I should have thanked Heaven for the blessing of your sweet love! Brenda, why could it not have been so?"

He half expected that she would rise indignantly and spurn him; but she did not. She leaned there against his knee, his arms holding her closely, her eyes fixed upon his glowing face, her breath coming quickly, almost spasmodically. It is so sweet to be loved—sweet to any woman, Heaven to a lonely one, to feel that there is some great, strong, manly heart that is a shrine sacred to her alone—that there is a heart to whom she is more than all the world—more than life itself.

Was Brenda so greatly to be censured if that thought filled her soul for a little while?

Oh! you who have never been tempted—you who have had nothing but tenderness and affection all your lives—you who have lived under the protecting shelter of a happy home—my question is not addressed to you. What can the untempted know of temptation?

It is to the disappointed, the empty-hearted—her upon whose lips love has turned to Dead Sea Fruit—that the question is put. Wouldn't you have given yourself up to the joy of being loved for one little moment in all the years of an accursed existence?

She lifted her hand and touched his cheek reverently, tenderly, as she might have touched the skirts of a god. She did not resist him when, overcome by his emotion, he bent his head and pressed his lips upon hers in a kiss that was not unholy. She was grateful to him for it. She could have bowed down and worshipped him because he loved her, for she knew that such love as his would have been no degradation to a vestal virgin.

"Have I offended you, my darling?" he whispered, his voice broken by a sob.

Still she did not draw herself from him, but yielded herself to the embrace, kissing him in return.

"No," she answered back, her voice low and still as it would be in a sanctuary. "I am so deeply grateful to you for your love that I don't know how to say it to you. It seems to me that it has haloed my life with the only happiness that I can ever know. I am so lonely, so miserable, so heart-sick and forlorn! I feel like the wayfarer who comes upon the oasis in the desert just as he has given up all hope. You will be my friend; you will help me to do what is right, for my boy's sake; you will show me the way to keep in the path where, when he hears my pitiful story in the years that are to come, he will see that he has no cause to blush for his mother, knowing her to have been an honest woman—you will do all this for me, will you not, because you love me?"

He bowed his head above her as the *religieuse* does above the crucifix.

"Heaven helping me, I will," he answered, reverently.

She put up her hand, and, brushing back from his brow the hair that was turning grey, she kissed him lightly; then, disengaging herself from his arms, she arose. She stood with her hand resting upon his head, as if in benediction.

"I ought to be sorry," she said, gently, "that you suffer with me; but I cannot—just yet."

"I would willingly suffer ten times the torture for this brief moment," he said, with a smile in his eyes. "You have been very good to me, Brenda."

"I wish—oh, I wish," she began, passionately, "that it had been you! I wish from my soul that——" Then she interrupted herself, pressing her hand over her mouth, as if repressing her own words with pain. "That is wicked," she went on after a pause—"bitterly wicked; but it is very hard to always keep in the straight and narrow path when one is so cruelly alone. You must think for me and help me, Darcy—I know so little of what I ought to do. I have made such a horrible failure of my life! But I have no right to disgrace that family that has befriended me; I have no right to stamp that girl as an outcast who has never injured me. I have shaped the lines of my own existence, and I must abide by them. And you will help me, will you not?"

"I will," he groaned.

"And Bessie shall never know?"

"She shall never know."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Ten minutes later Darcy Brooke and Brenda joined Bessie upon the lawn.

She seemed to have lost herself in a deep reverie; and did not hear them until Brenda stood by her side; then she aroused herself with a smile. She put up her hand and affectionately touched Brenda.

Somehow the silent sympathy seemed to go right to Brooke's heart. He looked down upon the little cripple girl with a gentle tenderness that he had never felt for her before. There was a new and unexpected sweetness in her disposition that drew him toward her, and with a sudden impulse he bent his head and kissed the hand that pressed Brenda's.

Bessie coloured furiously. She did not look at him at once, but there was a half-tremulous smile about her mouth that showed him she was not displeased. Brenda saw, too, and a strange sensation came over her that she could not quite analyze.

"What have you two decided upon?" Bessie asked, when she could control her voice.

"To let matters shape themselves for the present," answered Brooke, quietly. "There is nothing that can be done yet. Warrender and—and Violet are upon the water and will not arrive for very nearly a week. That gives us several days in which to think and plan, and we may be able to see our way more clearly in that time."

With a loving glance Bessie turned to Brenda.

"Mr. Brooke will remain with us to dinner,' she said, gently. "Will you tell Mrs. Price?"

Brenda departed at once upon her mission, and Bessie turned swiftly to Brooke.

"You must do nothing, advise or allow no course in the matter that will separate me from Annie," she cried, earnestly. "I would say nothing in her presence, because I have feared that she might run away from me, believing that it was for my good and that of all concerned. I believe her capable of any sacrifice, but I could never endure that. She has suffered enough. She has no money; she is too young and too beautiful for contact with the world not to be fatal to her. She must not do it. Unless you assist me I am quite sure that I cannot manage her. She has sacrificed enough for my sister's sake, and I must see that her life is no harder than it needs must be. Will you help me?"

He had seated himself beside her chair, and was leaning toward her, looking earnestly into her colourless but lovely face.

"I will!" he answered, almost eagerly. "I wish I could make you understand the situation just as it is without hurting you. She is as noble, as pure as an angel. The circumstances that have arisen are those of a hideous misfortune; nothing more. It was all occasioned by a lack of trust. I hope you believe, you know that, Bessie. She is worthy of your generous kindness to her, worthy in every sense."

"I am sure of that," she answered, unctuously. "I don't understand the situation exactly, and I have never tried to; but no guilt could ever look out of eyes as pure as hers. You seem to know all about the affair, Mr. Brooke, and therefore you are able to act for her interest better than I. I would not have her sacrificed in any way, even for my sister's sake. You know that, do you not?"

"Yes," he said, gently. "You are very good, very noble, Bessie."

A great admiration for her seemed to come over him. He understood the hidden qualities of her nature better, and the sympathy that had always made him kind and gentle toward her was tempered with another feeling, that, while not love, was a warm and abiding friendship, a regard for her generosity and nobility that he had never comprehended until now.

He no longer looked upon her as an afflicted child, but as a woman who was not to be pitied for misfortune, but to be admired and loved.

She seemed to read something of his sensations, and a warm flush of pleasure dyed her pale cheeks.

She could not reply to his last remark, and it was a great relief to her when Brenda returned to them.

They sat there among the trees until dinner was served, then afterwards Brooke took his leave.

"I may come again to-morrow, may I not?" he asked, as he held Bessie's hand. "We three seem to be so united now in our common secret that I shall feel no satisfaction when I am not with you. I may come to-morrow, and at least a little while every day, may I not?"

"Yes," murmured Bessie, faintly.

Then he held Brenda's hand for a moment in silence—a silence that spoke more eloquently to her than any words could have done. In it she seemed to read all the magnitude of his great, self sacrificing love, and a warm gratitude filled her heart.

She looked into his eyes and smiled, while his filled with tears. He dropped her hand and left them hastily.

Brenda sat down again upon the garden seat. Her sun-hat had fallen back, her short curls were disarranged by the breeze which had fanned a slight colour into her cheeks. She was deeply lost in thought, and was aroused at last by hearing Bessie sigh.

"What is it, dear?" she asked, tenderly, leaning towards her friend.

Then she noticed how unusually white Bessie had grown; she noticed the dark circles that had come under the beautiful eyes; she noticed that the lips were drawn and pinched, and a little cry fell from her.

"You are ill!" she cried; "and I have been so selfish—so selfish not to have seen! Let me get you to the house. Let me——"

But Bessie put out her hand with a silencing gesture.

"I am suffering no pain," she exclaimed—"at least, no bodily pain. It is not that, Annie, but it does seem that we are both cursed in this world. Oh, what a fool I am! What a miserable, helpless fool!"

"What is it, dearest?"

"Only the same old folly!" cried the girl, passionately. "I thought I should escape it up here in the quiet of this beautiful country, but it seems that Heaven will never have done cursing my wretched life. I have tried to bear it patiently and bravely, but I cannot—I cannot! There is some horrible fatality in the very air that I breathe."

"You mean——"

"I mean that I came here to avoid that man. I mean that I loved him so that to be near him was the greatest agony that life could hold for me, knowing that he could never be more to me than he now is, knowing that I am more securely chained to my cursed existence than is the wretch with the ball fettered to his ankle. Now you see how it is. I can't control myself, and he is here. Here, where every day of my life I shall be forced to look at him, to feel his presence, to listen to his voice. And it has been a little worse to-day than usual, that is all."

"Wait!" cried Brenda, hoarsely. "Surely you don't mean Darcy Brooke?"

"Yes, I do. It is madness, is it not? Madness for me, a cripple, a blot upon the beauty of Heaven's handiwork, a hideous deformity in the midst of exquisite contours, to dare to love a man like that!"

Brenda had never heard such bitterness in the tones of any voice, and it hurt her to the soul. She almost hated herself for her own beauty of form when she realised how the contrast must pierce her friend. And this man whom Bessie loved, loved her. It absolutely seemed to strike terror to her soul.

And then the memory came to her of all that Bessie was—all the generosity, the nobility. What was a little symmetry of form compared to that? Why should not Darcy Brooke love her?

And then the thought of herself surged up over all. It was because of her. Because he loved her, the wife of his friend. Great Heaven! how had she not cursed that family by her own mad folly! First Violet and now Bessie.

There was a wildness in her eyes that Bessie could not comprehend when she turned to her.

"Why should he not love you?" she cried, almost fiercely. "You are beautiful and good. There is no woman whom I have ever seen had eyes and hair like yours. You are clever. There is no reason why he should not love you. Do you think that it would make any difference to you if he could never walk? Do you think that you would hesitate to give him your heart, your life, your very soul, because his legs were of no use? There is no reason why he should not love you; and he must, he shall!"

"You are talking wildly!" exclaimed Bessie. "You had as well command the man in the moon to fall in love with a mermaid."

"Don't let us talk of it now!" cried Brenda, feverishly. "Don't let us. I can't tell you how I feel, but it shall not be so impossible as you think."

Bessie did not reply. There was a little cynical smile upon her lips. A grief that is shared is never quite so hard to bear, and she felt a certain relief from having spoken of it. They went into the house after a time, and not much later Bessie retired to her room for the night.

For the first time it was relief to Brenda to see her go. She kissed her friend good night with even greater tenderness than usual, then as quickly as she could she made her escape to her own room.

There was a wildness about her eyes that was unusual, a pallor about her mouth that was ominous. She leaned against the door and closed the lids over her aching eyes for some moments; then, very slowly, the tears began to trickle through. It was a pathetic picture that she made, and at last, unable to bear her grief in an upright position, she sank down upon the floor, her face concealed by her knees.

"It has come at last!" she groaned. "The curse, the horrible, agonizing curse upon my life has followed me even here. But for me Darcy Brooke would learn to love Bessie. He could not help it; she is so good, so beautiful, so true! I must go—go where neither of them shall ever see me again, until I know that the end I so long for has been accomplished. I cannot return home, for she would find me out there. I must go alone—oh, so cruelly alone! It is the curse—the curse my father put upon my life for disobedience! I meant no harm—no harm! When is this to end?"

CHAPTER XXIX.

The hours had advanced far into the night before Brenda arose from her crouching position by the door. She stood upon her feet, feeling cold and stiff, but there was a curious absence of pain in her heart.

She was in total darkness, save for the rays of the moon that stole solemnly through the window, silent but sympathetic. There seemed a touch of sadness in the caressing light that lay upon her head that was soothing, but she could not comprehend her own sensations.

She lighted a lamp mechanically, and placing it upon her tiny Louis Quinze writing desk, she sat down beside it.

"I have suffered so much," she said, quietly, "that my heart seems dead. I can feel nothing more. It matters little what becomes of me now. I have tried to do what was right, but I have been so hideously mistaken that it seems useless to try any more. It matters not what happens now. I don't care. It is all at an end. I have tried and failed. Nothing matters. I have done with trying!"

There was a sort of grim recklessness in her manner that had never been there before, even under her worst suffering. She calmly opened her desk and took out some writing paper, smiling half cynically as she did so.

"It reminds me of another night when I sat at a desk writing," she said to herself. "The moon was shining then, too, only it was a cold, wintry moon that shone upon the snow; but my heart was warm. Now it is all reversed. It is my heart that is cold—cold and heavy as a stone. Then my only thought was of death. Perhaps it would have been better if I had had the courage to carry out my intentions; but I shall not die now. I have not gained bravery with time. I make no plans—care nothing what happens. I am ready to welcome anything that comes, but there must be no stain upon my son's mother of her own making. Anything but that!"

Her thoughts were running so while she got pen and ink ready; then with a firm hand she wrote:

"Dear Mr. Brooke,—I am going away. There are no explanations which I can make. With all my soul I thank you for the kindness and friendship that you have shown me. There are so many things that I should like to say to you, but there are reasons why I must be silent. Tell Bessie, and make her believe, that it is much better that I should go; and, by your friendship for me, be kind to her. Let no day go by without your seeing her. Make her feel your tenderness, your regard. I am going forever. The only thing that you can do for me now is not to seek me, and not allow her to do so. This farewell is eternal.

"Brenda."

To Bessie she simply wrote:

"It is better so, dearest. Farewell! There is a day in the far future which I foresee when I shall return to you. Keep my secret, and Heaven bless you!"

She left that upon the desk, then quietly changed her gown for one of dark cloth, put a few things, with what little money was in her possession, into a small travelling-bag, and taking her letter, which she had sealed and addressed to Brooke, in her hand, she quietly left the house.

Only once did she turn to look back, and that was toward the window of Bessie's room. The light was burning faintly as it was always left. She paused for a moment, her lips moved inaudibly, then she passed on down the drive-way, and out of the gates of River View.

It was more than a mile to the station, but the walk did her good, the cool night air gratefully touching her hot brow. She had barely time to post her letter before a train that was already in the station was ready to leave. She stepped in without asking its destination. There was a faint sensation of chagrin when she discovered from the conductor that it was London, but she resigned herself to destiny, and leaned calmly back in her seat.

Her eyes closed, and a deep, dreamless sleep came upon her which lasted until her arrival in the city.

There were but few passengers. She left the train with them, and at the entrance to the station she stood gazing about her. It was about three o'clock in the morning.

She knew enough of London to be quite aware that it was worse than useless to attempt to secure a room in any reputable hotel, alone as she was, and the thought of either remaining in horrible inactivity in the waiting-room of the station, or walking the streets until morning was not pleasant.

She was wondering in a vague sort of way what she should do, when a gentleman, elderly and well-dressed, accosted her.

"Pardon me, young lady," he said, kindly, "but were you expecting friends?"

She looked at him for a moment before replying.

There were the gray hairs that youth instinctively trusts; besides, the face was filled with a certain benevolence that is never mistaken; and seeing that, she answered,—

"No, sir, I was not. I have no friends here. I was simply wondering which was the lesser of two evils, to walk the streets until morning, or to remain in this station."

"But is it necessary to do one or the other?"

"London hotels don't receive women alone at this hour, sir," answered Brenda, with a shadowy smile. "I was unfortunate in taking a train that would arrive at this time."

"But are you all alone? Is there no one——"

He hesitated, and she finished the sentence.

"No one to whom I have come? No. That is, no one in particular. I am only one of the many thousands of homeless ones."

"And you would like to go to a hotel?"

"Yes, I should."

"Then perhaps you would allow me to be your escort. I know the proprietors and most of the employees in the Beresford. It is quiet. You can remain there for the remainder of the night, and to-morrow have time to think of the future. Will you trust yourself to me?"

Again that curious smile crossed her face.

"Why not, sir?" she asked, quietly. "A woman with the world to face must trust those who appear infinitely less worthy of trust than you. I shall be very grateful if you will take me."

He beckoned to the driver of a hansom, who crossed the street to them; then, before putting Brenda into the cab, he said to the driver, quite distinctly,—

"To the Beresford Hotel. Drive quickly."

He placed her inside and took his seat beside her.

"Will you pardon me if I ask you a few questions about yourself?" he said, gently, as soon as they had started. "I had a daughter once about your age. She is dead now, but her memory makes me love all young girls, particularly the friendless ones, and that is what you said of yourself, I think. It was the friendless ones that she loved, and I love them for her sake."

"You may ask me all you like," answered Brenda, feeling that sudden warming of the heart that one does in the presence of a person one can trust.

"You are all alone in the world?"

"All alone."

"Your parents are dead?"

"My mother is dead," she answered, after a momentary hesitation.

The man's face darkened a trifle. He thought he understood something of the ill-treatment to which that young, tender thing had been subjected, and he would not distress her by further questioning upon that point.

"Now pardon me for a great liberty," he said, kindly. "You don't look like a poor person. When you said you were homeless, did you mean that you would be forced to make your own living?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever done it?"

"No."

"Then what do you propose to do? What can you do?"

"I don't know. There seems so little; but if all else fails, I can become a servant."

"Great heavens! You don't know what you are talking about. A girl like you had better go and throw herself in the Thames than that. You don't know what I mean, of course, but I don't propose to explain to you; but it would be utter madness to contemplate such an act. Have you never thought of what you want to do—what you would like to do?"

"Yes, I have thought many times," she replied, remembering those long, lonely days she had passed in her cousin's little sitting-room, when she had nothing to do, during her weary days of convalescence, but think of those things that seemed to concern her future; "but I have had no education for it, no preparation."

"Nevertheless, what is it?"

"I should like to be a nurse; I should like to minister to the sick and suffering; I should like to see others bear their crosses bravely or impatiently, as the case might be; I should like to forget my own sorrow in the physical suffering of others. But I have had no training, and but little experience."

"But you like it?"

"I do."

"There must be a beginning to everything, you know. With your permission I will call to-morrow morning, and we will talk it over. There is no reason why it should not be arranged. It seems almost like a fatality that you mentioned it to me. Will you take my card?"

She took it from him, and by the glare of an electric light, read:

"Dr. Hastings."

It was a name famous in the medical profession, and Brenda remembered it.

CHAPTER XXX.

It was scarcely ten o'clock the following morning when the card of Doctor Hastings was taken to Brenda's room.

She had had ample time in which to think of what she was to do during the hours of that sleepless night. She was already dressed, and did not keep him waiting, but joined him almost at once in the parlour of the hotel.

"Have you breakfasted?" was the first question he put to her as he held the frankly outstretched hand.

"No."

"Neither have I, and I am famished. Will you come with me? We can talk better over a refreshing cup of coffee. Have you been to bed?"

"Certainly."

"Then you have not slept," he said, carelessly, as he led the way to the breakfast-room. "Young girls should not indulge in such a pastime as that; it is not good for the health."

"I shall never suffer from loss of sleep," answered Brenda, with a faint smile. "I don't believe there have ever been more than three nights in my life when I have not slept soundly."

"It is a popular fallacy," said the doctor, looking over the breakfast *menu* with interest, "that a person in great mental distress cannot sleep. I don't believe it. The greater the mental distress, the more numbing is the effect upon the brain, and the more surely does sleep follow."

"It seems to me," said Brenda, thoughtfully, "that it is impossible to establish any special theory on a subject like that; the effect is so uncertain. And is it not due very largely to the condition of the brain? I have not thought of it before, but in looking back over my own life I can see how contrary the effects have been. I have slept under one blow, and have stared at the ceiling all night under the influence of another."

Doctor Hastings ordered an elaborate breakfast; then, when the waiter had departed, he turned toward Brenda and looked interestedly at her.

"Then you have suffered?" he asked, quietly. "I don't mean to inquire into the secrets of your life."

"I have suffered," answered Brenda, softly.

"I see. And for that very reason you sympathize with those who are suffering. You want to alleviate physical pain, knowing that no one but the Great Healer can cure mental pain. Is that it?"

"Something like it."

"And you have had no experience?"

"No professional experience."

"But you have been about a sick room to a certain extent?"

"To a great extent."

"And you like it?"

"I do."

"Umph! I suppose you would not want to go regularly through a school for the education of nurses?"

"I cannot, doctor. I am absolutely dependent upon my own resources, and I should starve while I was waiting for the education."

"But, you know, you could not take entire charge without that. You could only be an assistant, and the pay is poor."

"That is a small consideration. If you can help me to anything, it will be an act of greatest charity."

"Here is your breakfast. Now let us see how well you can eat, for a great deal in the life of a nurse depends upon her ability to keep up her strength by the consumption of good, wholesome food."

There was quite a silence between them for some time; then, as if he were speaking of any ordinary defect of organisation, Doctor Hastings said, coolly,—

"It is a great pity—a great pity for one situated as you are—but you are so absurdly pretty."

Brenda coloured. She was both amused and embarrassed at the remark. Then she saw that it had given her an opportunity that she was not slow to embrace. She leaned toward him eagerly.

"Will my appearance make so great a difference?" she asked.

"Yes. I should not dare to place you with unmarried men, and you surely know the failings of most women. They don't want a beautiful nurse in the house with their husbands and their sons."

"But could I not alter my appearance?"

She could not quite control the trembling of her tones which betrayed her eagerness. Doc-

tor Hastings lifted his eyes from the steak he was calmly cutting.

"Do you wish to do that?" he inquired.

She hesitated for a moment, then answered:

"Yes."

"Simply because of your beauty?"

How kind and beneficent he looked as his eyes rested upon her! Could she tell him the lie that she had framed? She dropped her knife and fork, and bent toward him earnestly.

"No!" she cried. "There is no reason why I should not tell you the truth. It is not because of that, but because I wish to avoid any possibility of recognition. I can't tell you the story, even if you refuse to help me because of that; but neither can I accept your kindness with a lie upon my lips. I swear to you that I have never done a thing in my life for which I have reason to blush, and yet there is a black curse upon my life. It is for the sake of another that I must be dead to the world, that I must run no risk of detection.

"And that other is a man?"

"No; a woman."

"But——"

"I beg of you not to question me, for I cannot answer. There are reasons why I must remain silent for ever and ever. It is more than the life, it is the honour of an innocent woman that is involved; and I will conceal that which I have to conceal. I will do it, if I must do it in the bed of the river!"

Doctor Hastings waited for a moment; then he said, quietly,—

"You have forgotten all about your breakfast, and there is nothing less pleasant than cold beef-steak. What do you propose to do to change your appearance?"

"I don't know."

"You'll need a nurse's cap and apron, you know. You will look like a child in masquerade."

"Then why not let me have a wig with just a little gray in it, and a pair of faintly-coloured glasses—not sufficiently coloured to attract attention, you know, but just enough to disguise my eyes?"

"It might be a good scheme. Suppose you amuse yourself by going out and making your purchases this morning. I will come back and take you to luncheon, and you can show me how you are going to look. I have got to make some professional calls now, and I may hear of something to please you. Do you know the city?"

"Perfectly."

"And"—with a most business-like air—"have you got enough money to get the things?"

"Yes."

"Very well. I will fetch the glasses, making sure that I get something that will not injure your eyes. You get the wig, cap, aprons, and the rest of it. I'll try to get back by two o'clock but if I am not exactly on time, wait for me. I hate eating alone."

He arose, and held out his hand with a smile that seemed to warm her heart.

"Good-bye," he said, gently. "You must not think of yourself too much. I have always found it a bad plan. Look about you. There is not a man or woman whom you see who has not his or her troubles to bear, and there is not one of them who does not suffer more from self absorption. Think of others. That is the only cure for mental ailment. I am going to help you. You must not think that you are friendless and alone in the world, for you have—me."

Brenda could not control her voice to reply. There was something so kind and tender in his tone—something so filled with gentleness—that she knew she could trust him, and it seemed to fill her with faith and hope.

He saw her emotion, and did not wait for an answer, but pressed her hand and hurried out.

"Poor child!" he muttered, behind his big gray moustache. "I wonder who the rascal is who has spoiled her pretty life like this? I should like to know, that I might break his infernal head. I believe, for the first time in my life, I am growing curious. I should really like to know that girl's history."

CHAPTER XXXI.

"Welcome home, Mr. Warrender."

The words were spoken by Agnes Blount to Lionel Warrender upon the day of his return to England.

He had made his escape from his wife and the family, who would have detained him, and had slipped away to the nursery, where he knew he would find his little son. Agnes knew that he would come, and had not been present upon his arrival, preferring to appear the devoted nurse—the foster-mother to the child whom she knew had grown to be his idol.

Her eyes and complexion were just a little paler than before, and there was a certain set look about the lips that had grown in his absence; but Warrender scarcely saw her. He himself had grown older, graver; but his sad, quiet face was singularly handsome, a fact that was not lost upon Agnes.

He hastily shook hands with her, then sprung toward his son, clasping the little fellow in his arms with a warmth of affection that was beautiful. He kissed the baby face again and again, murmuring words that one only expects from a mother toward her child; but he told himself that he was father and mother both to this little one.

"Has he been well, Agnes?" Lionel asked, turning with the child still in his arms.

"Very well indeed, sir. You know that I should have written instantly had it not been so."

"Yes, you have been very faithful, very loyal and true, Agnes, and I would not have you think that I do not appreciate it, and am not grateful. I have brought you some beautiful things from France, and also you, my little man—my darling! How my boy has grown! Can he talk any yet?"

"Tell papa that you love him, boy."

Agnes stood beside the father and son while she spoke to the boy, and in obedience to her command the faltering lips murmured,—

"Me love 'oo, papa."

The man clasped the child to his heart. There were tears in his eyes, and he could say nothing. How like the boy was to Brenda. It brought up all the old days to him again—days when

"To love and be loved was the sum of it all."

The room and its occupants faded, and in the little face looking so wonderingly into his he seemed to see again the face of his wife—of Brenda, the only woman he had ever loved. He forgot that other who occupied her place—forgot that anyone stood between him and the love of his youth. He was back again in their lovely nest, and for the moment he was happy.

Then—ah, Heaven! what a cruel awakening reality is! He could bear it no longer. He groaned as the childish fingers touched his face, and rising, he abruptly put the child down and left the room.

Agnes glanced after him. All the bright expression of expectancy at his home-coming had vanished. The set look had returned to the mouth. For a moment she was silent; then a low, almost cruel laugh fell from her lips.

"And this is the ending of all my dreams!" she muttered hoarsely. "That is all that you had to say to me on your home-coming. You are a brave man, Lionel Warrender, that you have dared to do this! Don't you know that I will not bear it? I have schemed, and worked, and sinned for this—this great reward that I have received, when I hoped to gain your toleration at least. I should have been satisfied with so little, so little; but you did not give it to me—not even that! Now—well, we shall see!"

Another laugh made the child, that she had taken in her arms, shiver; but she quickly put him to sleep and left the room.

The following day she made an excuse to take a bunch of flowers that had arrived to Mrs. Warrender's room.

"You are the little one's nurse, are you not?" Violet asked, lightly.

"Yes, madame."

"How is the baby?"

"Quite well, thank you, madame."

"I suppose Mr. Warrender has been in to see him?" said Violet, with an affectation of indifference.

"Yes, madame; several times. He is very fond of—babies."

"Yes, I have observed it," said Violet, telling her lie quietly. "Wait. You need not go just yet. I want you to bring the baby to see me; will you not?"

"Yes, madame."

"You are very fond of him also, aren't you?"

"Yes, madame."

"You knew the baby before—before my husband adopted him, I believe?"

Agnes did not reply. She meant that her hesitation should attract the young wife's attention, and it did. Violet started violently. She waited a moment, then said, carelessly,—

"You knew the baby's mother, did you not?"

"Yes—madame," stammered Agnes.

Violet turned quickly and faced her. Why had Agnes come there? Had it been for the purpose of being questioned? She put the queries quickly to herself, and answered them to suit herself.

Her life had been a mistake. She had loved her husband when she married him, in her own way—that is, she had not been indifferent to him; but it was her ambition that had made her marry him. He was one of the wealthiest men in London. He was handsome and talented. There was not a matron with a marriageable daughter in her set who had not tried to secure the prize, and she and her own mother had schemed to gain it for herself, and they had succeeded. She cared no more for Lionel Warrender at the time of their marriage than she cared for one of her Worth gowns; but his indifference, his almost cruel coldness, had won her. And now she loved him. A wild, half-maniacal jealousy filled her heart that she had no power to control.

She was jealous of the memory of that girl of whose very name she was in ignorance—jealous of the woman whom she believed dead years ago. And that morbid desire to know all about the child's mother seized her with a strength that was like mania. She forgot her own dignity, forgot everything but her desire, and throwing herself into a chair, she affected to lift her eyes languidly. The most unobservant could have seen the glitter in her eye, and by it have read her unconquerable desire.

(To be continued.)

HER LITTLE SISTER.

—o—

Miss Orkney had just finished packing her trunk for the seaside. Far be it from us to particularise all its splendours of evening-dress, driving costume, and exquisite seaside toilet. Suffice it to say that everything was perfect in its way.

"I really think," said Adela Orkney, pausing to consider where the tennis-racket could best go, "that I must have been born under a lucky planet. Here was I despairing of any better place to pass the summer than Uncle David Hopwood's farm, in Berkshire hills, when I chance to meet Rosamond Brewster in a shop, and get a real, genuine invitation to go with her to dear, delicious Newport, expenses all paid, and nothing to do but to look pretty and make myself generally agreeable to Rosa and her mother.

I wish I knew what hotel the Ecclestons stop at when they are there. But, of course, I shall be sure to meet Captain Rodney, and this time I mean to make a sure thing of it. I don't like this hovering on the outskirts of society, like the peri peeping into Paradise, and it's high time my market was made."

She smiled at her own enchanting reflection in the opposite mirror. Golden-haired and dark-eyed, with fleeting dimples in cheek and chin, and the sweetest of little straight noses—surely, with such weapons as those she might well be assured of conquering Fate. But in that very instant the housemaid knocked loudly at the door, and a rosy child rushed tumultuously into the room, and precipitated herself into Adela's arms.

"She would come right up, miss," said the maid. "She told me you were her sister."

"So I am," defiantly cried the child, a fair-haired, hazel-eyed little thing of nine years old. "I am Olga Orkney. Ain't I, Dell? Kiss me, Dell. Aren't you glad to see me?"

Adela stood, as it were, transfixed, as the lithe little creature wound and twined itself about her in vehement caresses.

"Olga!" she said, "where did you come from?"

Her features were set, her voice strangely unlike itself.

"Aunt Jo is dead," explained Olga, pushing the clustering flaxen curls out of her eyes, "and there was no money left. They said I was to come to you. Oh! Dell, aren't you glad to see me?" with quivering lip and eyes suffused with tears. "I've nobody left but you; and you're my sister, you know."

Adela's delicate face hardened more and more.

"Not your sister," said she; "only your half-sister. My father married a shop-woman when my own mother died, and—and you are her very image! Your aunt, Josephine, was her sister, and she undertook to take charge of you. I don't see why you should be here. No, you needn't take off your things. I leave this place to-morrow; there is no place for you."

"But I can go where you go, Dell," pleaded the bewildered mite.

Adela shuddered at the mere idea.

"No, you can not!" said she, sharply; "I am going to the sea with some friends."

"But what am I to do, Dell?"

Adela shrugged her shoulders.

"I haven't the least idea," said she. "You must go back; that's the only thing that is at all practical. The parish will look after you; it's their business."

Olga slept on the sofa in her sister's room that night, and the next day she was sent to the station, with money enough to pay her fare, and a note to the conductor of the omnibus that connected the train with the village stage-line; while Adela herself, in an exquisite dove-gray cashmere dress, joined the party who were travelling to Newport-by-the-Sea.

Little Olga went smiling to the parish overseer. She had often played with his little girl, and she leaned against his knee as he opened and read Miss Orkney's succinct letter of instructions.

"Well, I declare!" said he, running his eye a second time over the lines to make sure that he was not mistaken. "Wife, look here! What d'ye think of a fine city lady that sends her little sister back—to the workhouse—eh?"

"Them Orkneys never had no heart," responded the selectman's better half. "And poor Josephine Jones always said that Adela was the worst of the lot. Poor little dear!" as she stroked Olga's hair.

"Well, I may as well take her there," said the overseer.

And little Olga, fancying that she was going for a ride, climbed joyfully up into the old trap, her hat-ribbon stuck full of dandelions and wild geraniums.

"I declare," said the overseer to his wife, afterwards, "it was the hardest day's work I ever done, leaving that child there. She ran a good way after us, calling me to stop—not to leave her there in the workhouse, but I whipped up old Bess and made like I didn't hear."

"Mrs. Popkins will be good to her," said his wife. "She's a kind creetur; the very person for matron in a place like that. But the idea of Adela Orkney puttin' her own little sister on the parish! I can't get over it."

Nearly two weeks had elapsed, and a sultry July sun was throbbing down on the dusty road that led from the Squire's into the village, and Mrs. Eccleston held up her lilac-lined lace parasol to keep off the intrusive beams.

"I don't think I can stand this dulness long," sighed Mrs. Eccleston. She was a stately, elderly lady, with white hair brushed up from her face, and a lovely toilet of lilac silk. "Not even to please you, dear Alicia. I hate Newport, but even Newport is better than this dead-alive sort of existence."

"But, my love," pleaded her companion, a richly-dressed matron in black satin and opals, "if you carry out this extraordinary caprice of yours and adopt a child out of the workhouse, that will be something to amuse you."

"I love children," said Mrs. Eccleston, serenely. "And if Rodney is really bent upon marrying this pretty friend of the Brewsters, I shall be more lonely than ever."

"A poodle, now," suggested Mrs. Darrow, "or a little South American monkey. Some people think that even a parrot——"

"Oh! I prefer children," said Mrs. Eccleston. "Poodles, indeed! and parrots! Do tell your coachman to drive faster, Alicia, or we shall never get there. My gracious me, what's that?"

The horses had shied violently at something that suddenly emerged from the blossoming hedges close to their very feet.

"Please, give me a ride!" shrilled out a sweet, high-pitched little voice. "I've run away, and I want to get to the station."

Mrs. Eccleston stared at the deep-brown eyes and tangled yellow curls.

"Heavens!" she cried, "how lovely the sprite is! Who are you, child, and where have you run from?"

"From the workhouse," whispered Olga, with a startled glance around, as if unwilling to intrust her secret even to the birds in the hedges, the butterflies that soared in the sunshine. "I hate the workhouse! I won't stay there! Please—please take me to the station! I want to go to London."

"Child, what on earth could you do in London?" cried Mrs. Eccleston.

"I don't know," murmured Olga, her head drooping like a broken flower. Some one would be kind to me. But I can't stay in that place!"

Mrs. Eccleston looked once more at the child, then she glanced toward her friend.

"I don't see but that the matter is settled," said she, taking Olga into her lap, and nestling the yellow head against her shoulder. "Here is the child that I am to adopt. Little one, will you come and be my little girl?"

Olga looked wistfully at the white-haired old lady.

"I love you!" said she, with a child's sweet, unreasoning confidence. "Yes, I will be your little girl!"

So it happened, through this strange chain of circumstances, that Mrs. Eccleston happened to be sitting on a veranda in one of the most exclusive hotels at Newport, with Olga playing at her feet. She knew all the child's simple history now; she was quite certain that the beautiful London girl, in whom her only son was so interested, was the heartless creature who had abandoned her own little sister to the tender mercies of the village workhouse.

"But a man in love is a man under a spell," said she to herself. "Unless he sees and hears for himself, he will never believe a word against her."

So she had come to Newport in a quiet, casual sort of way, and sent her card to the hotel where her son was sojourning.

"I can't endure those big, noisy caravansaries," wrote she; "so you'll find me here, my dear Rodney. I may stay a week, or I may stay a month. It depends upon how the sea air agrees with my little new daughter."

Captain Rodney Eccleston smiled as he read the pencilled card to Miss Orkney.

"The dear little mother!" said he. "So she has really carried out her whim of adopting a daughter. I wonder how she would like two!"

Miss Orkney smiled and cast down her beryl eyes, those glittering orbs of greenish blue, fringed with golden lashes. Rodney Eccleston was always saying those "leading" things, yet he had not yet formally proposed.

"It's sure to come, dear," Miss Brewster had encouragingly remarked. "Depend upon it, it's a mere question of time. He's madly in love with you. I can see it in his eyes."

"Will you call there with me?" said Eccleston.

"Oh, certainly!" assented Adela.

And very lovely she looked as he led her that afternoon into the cool dark of Mrs. Eccleston's parlour.

"Mother," said he, "let me present to you my friend, Miss Orkney."

"Charmed, I am sure," said the old lady, adjusting her *lorgnette*. "I've got one of the family with me already. Jump up, Olga," to a flaxen-haired fairy dimly visible in the background, as she played with a superb English mastiff, "and speak to your sister."

Olga obeyed, putting up her lips to be kissed.

"How do you do, Adela?" said she. "I'm Mrs. Eccleston's little girl now."

Mr. Eccleston looked amazed.

"I thought you told me," said, he "that you had no living relatives, Miss Orkney?"

Mrs. Eccleston smiled.

"Miss Orkney probably means," said she, "that little sisters in the workhouse don't count as relatives."

And she related to her son, then and there, before Miss Orkney's shrinking self, the whole history of Olga.

"Quite a romance, isn't it?" said she. "And yet there are people who declare that there is no sentiment left in the world."

Little Olga ran up to her sister.

"Have I done anything to vex you, Dell?" said she. "Why do you look so strange and white?"

"I—that is—the room's rather close," faltered Adela, and she took a hurried leave.

Rodney Eccleston, looking very grave, put her in the carriage and told the man to drive to the hotel—and that was the last time she ever saw him.

And there was an end of the Newport campaign. The Brewsters got rid of Miss Orkney as soon as they could. Somehow, she had lost her old, winsome spell. People glanced askance at her, and whispered mysteriously as she passed. She went back to London and accepted a position as "companion" to a dyspeptic old lady.

In the autumn she heard of Mr. Rodney Eccleston's engagement to Rosamond Brewster; and one windy October day, as she hurried along the dustiest and most crowded drive in the park, in search of the dyspeptic old lady's poodle-dog, who had slipped his leash, she chanced to look up into the very face of little Olga, riding in a cushioned *coupé* beside old Mrs. Eccleston.

"Oh, look! look!" cried the child, "there is Dell!"

But when Mrs. Eccleston glanced around no one was there. Adela had shrunk beside a cluster of laurels. Was not this last drop the bitterest of all her cup?

FACETIÆ.

THE man who wants to live in clover need only buy a lawn mower.

"I SAY, landlord, your food is worse than it was last year?" "Impossible, sir."

THE best method of handling bees, for an amateur, is by proxy.

A CLOCK runs all the time but never gets there.

IT is generally the man who can least afford the cost who has the reddest nose.

EVERY man has a bright future, but very few of us live long enough to catch up to it.

A LIAR tells a hundred truths to one lie; he has to, to make the lie good for anything.

IF you want to know just how small a man is, give him an office or let him become suddenly wealthy.

IT isn't the man who oftenest breaks his word who is the best authority on parts of speech.

THE dog that loses his master is without a friend, and so are some men when they lose a dog.

PERSISTENCY is the road to success. The only known exception to this rule is the case of a hen sitting on a china egg.

LIFE is short—only four letters in it. Three quarters of it is a "lie," and half of it an "if."

SHE: "And why is a ship called 'she'?" He: "Aye, ma'am! because the rigging costs so much."

JACK: "Ethel's face is one that grows on one." Maud: "Perhaps, but it never grew on her. It is hand-made."

THERE probably never was a man who could wear carpet slippers without looking slouchy and worthless.

THE calf's future is very uncertain. He never knows whether he is going to be veal, turtle soup, or chicken salad.

"MEET your wife with a smile on your lips," says an exchange. Better wait until the odour of the smile has abated somewhat, though.

FIRST TRADESMAN: "Is he a gentleman?" Second Tradesman: "Well, I suppose so. He doesn't pay his debts till you make him do so."

SCHOOLMASTER (who has just chastised Tommy in the usual place): "Now, go and sit down." Tommy: "Hoo, hoo! I can't, sir; it hurts."

"I CAN'T drink liquor," said Bob; "it goes right to my head." "Well," said Bob's friend, "where could it go with less danger of being crowded?"

THE lecturer said: "The roads up those mountains were too steep and rocky for even a donkey to climb; therefore I did not attempt the ascent."

YOU can safely trust the promoter, my son; but it is always proper to remember that it is his business to promote his own fortune, not yours.

AN INDEFINITE REQUEST.—Baldheaded Customer (in barber's shop): "I wan't a hair cut." Affable Barber: "Yes, sir; which hair?"

WICKARS: "I don't believe there is much difference between genius and insanity." Vickars: "Oh, yes, there is—a heap. The lunatic is sure of his food and clothes."

"Do you use night-caps?" asked his sweetheart. "Yes, love," he replied, "with a little sugar;" and she couldn't think what he meant.

FIRST PHILANTHROPIST: "What have you been doing for the past five or six years?" Second Philanthropist: "I have been collecting money to assist poor negros to emigrate to Liberia. What have you been doing?" First Philanthropist: "I've been collecting money to assist them back again."

MABIE: "Why, Ethel, what is the matter with Fido?" Ethel: "Isn't it too bad? I gave him to the laundress to wash, and she starched him!"

MR. CITIMANN: "Where in creation is that furnished cottage I rented for the summer?" Rural Carman: "Right over yonder, sir, behind your wife's trunk."

MAUDE: "Did Grace expect you to-day?" Imogen: "How can you ask? There's my photograph carefully dusted and placed in the middle of the mantelpiece."

"FATHER," said a six-year-old, "where is Atoms?" "Atoms, my boy? What do you mean?" "Why, the place where everything gets blown to."

BARBER (to tipsy customer): "Close your mouth, sir, please." T. C.: "It's all right; you won't cut me, mister." Barber: "I ain't afraid of cutting you. I'm afraid of losing my razor."

AT THE CONCERT.—Nervous Old Lady (to Grandson, during a duet): "Look at your watch, Georgie—I am sure it must be getting late; they are singing two at a time, so as to get finished."

PORTLY DAME (struggling, with the aid of her maid, into her last season's winter jacket): "Why, Jane, I really believe this thing has shrunk." "Yes, m'm; it is really wonderful how clothes do shrink at your time of life."

WIFE: "What's that white stuff on your shoulder?" Husband: "Chalk from a billiard cue, you know." Wife (sniffing): "Hereafter I wish you to use chalk that doesn't smell like toilet powder."

HE: "The bee doesn't get into girls' bonnets nowadays." She: "Why is it?" He: "Doesn't dare to; she would have him pinned on the outside in no time as an ornament."

"I THINK I shall bring up my boy to follow the sea for a livelihood." "Why have you settled on that?" "It seems to be the only industry in which one is not expected to begin at the bottom."

A TRICK OF THE TRADE.—Dealer (to his son): "Joseph, just ride this horse round for the gentleman." Joseph (in a whisper): "How must I ride—for the buying or selling?"

POMPOUS JUDGE: "I hope you have much practice?" Young lawyer: "Yes. I have, thank you." "I am glad to hear it. And in what branch is your practice mainly?" "Mainly in economy."

"ISN'T it a wonderful lesson to man—the way a canary caged for life sings and sings and sings week in week out?" "Lesson? I think it is a bad example. If a man were as vindictive as that he'd be executed."

HE (after many days): "Do you think as some do, that love is a disease?" She (responsively and hopefully): "Really, I cannot say what it is, but I think—I—I am sure it is catching."

"OH, FOR THE WINGS OF A DOVE!"—Helen: "Just listen to that soprano. What good would the wings of a dove do for her? She must weigh eighteen stone." Jack: "Probably she wants to trim a hat with them."

AT an election a candidate solicited a vote. "I would rather vote for the devil than for you," was the reply. "But in case your friend is not a candidate," said the solicitor, "might I then count on your assistance?"

A PENNY cigar, with a good draught, and an enterprising youth attached to the tail end of it, will load the surrounding atmosphere with a fragrance that heavily discounts a boot factory that burns its own scraps.

A LITTLE six-year-old boy went down to the country on a visit. About the first thing he got was a bowl of bread-and-milk. He tasted it, then hesitated for a moment, when his mother asked him if he didn't like it, to which he replied, smacking his lips: "Yes, mother; I was only wishing that our milkman in town would keep a cow."

STRANGER (at big hotel): "I notice you fee the waiters. Do you get better service?" Regular Guest: "No." Stranger: "Then why do you do it?" Regular Guest: "So they won't spill the soup down my back."

SCENE—Brighton drawing-room. Dorothy: "Mamma, won't you be photographed?" Mrs. Moneybags: "No, dear; my portraits are always unsuccessful. Next month we go abroad, when I shall be taken by one of the Old Masters."

"WHAT is a propaganda?" inquired the teacher. The boy looked at the ceiling, wrinkled his forehead, wrestled with the question a minute or two, and answered bravely that he guessed it was the brother of a proper goose.

"THE consumption of intoxicating liquors in this country staggers me!" exclaimed a temperance orator from the platform. "Me, too," gurgled a man at the rear of the hall, trying to steady himself up by the plastering.

"THIS bell," said a well-meaning sexton, when showing the belfry of an interesting village church to a party of visitors, "is only rung in case of a visit from the Lord Bishop of the diocese, a fire, a flood, or any other such calamities."

INEXPERIENCED advocates sometimes ask very silly questions in cross-examining witnesses. In a running-down case the other day a 'bus driver asserted that the boy who was injured passed in front of the horses' heads and "made a face" at him. "How long did it take him to make a face?" asked the barrister, suddenly assuming a fierce expression. "Not longer than you," was the reply.

GERMAN DISCIPLINE.—There was to be a grand review and inspection of the troops of a German garrison. A corporal gave the following orders to the soldiers: "Now, men, if the major asks you how you like your grub, you say 'Good.' If the colonel asks you, you must reply, 'Very good.' If the general asks you, you must speak up and say, 'It couldn't be better.'"

THE beautiful Countess of Castiglione once appeared at a fancy-dress ball at the court of Napoleon III. in a costume which consisted of but little else than sea-green gauze spangled with silver to represent the foam of waves. It was also trimmed with seaweed, and was cut very low. Meeting Prosper Merrimee she asked how he liked her dress. "Very much," said he, "but what is it intended to represent?" "Why, the ocean, of course." "At low tide, I presume," muttered the old wit, as the countess took the arm of the emperor.

MISTRESS: "You got back early, Bridget." Bridget: "Yis, mum. Oi rode in a kerrage; leastwise it was as good as a kerrage." "You were fortunate." "Yis, mum; it happened this way, mum. Oi forgot th' sthrate an' number, but says Oi, 'If Oi can foind th' sohmall-pox hospertal, Oi'll know me way,' says Oi; an' so Oi axed th' way; an' all at once everybody gave a holler and a run, and a polacemon run around the corner, and, befar Oi knew phwat had come over thim all, Oi was helped into an ambulance and given an illigant roide most all th' way here, mum."

IT is perhaps not generally known that when he was a young man Bismarck was for some time an official reporter for one of the courts of justice. In those days his temper sometimes got the better of him, but upon one occasion, at least, his wit saved him from disgrace. This was when questioning a witness the latter made an impudent retort, whereupon Bismarck exclaimed, angrily, "If you are not more respectful, I shall kick you out of the room." "Young man," said the judge, interrupting the proceedings, "I would have you understand that this is a dignified court of justice, and that if any kicking is to be done the court will do it." "Ah, you see," said Bismarck to the witness, "if you are not more respectful to me, the court will kick you out of the room; so be careful—very careful, sir."

SOCIETY.

In Burmah, women propose to men.

The Queen has not suffered at all in health from being at Osborne this summer. There has, so far, been only bright, bracing weather, which always suits Her Majesty.

An Italian lady, noted for her beautiful complexion, recommends the face to be washed in very cold water in winter, and very warm water in summer.

State secrets rarely leak out in Russia. Any person who divulges one, if discovered, is whirled off to Siberia.

The bedchamber of Napoleon, at St. Helena, is now a stable; and the room in which he breathed his last is used for threshing and winnowing wheat!

Mushrooms are favoured above all other foods by the Czar of Rusia, and he especially enjoys picking them himself.

One recommendation for the bell skirt is that it will teach women to be dainty about the inside of their skirts. The binding and lining of the bell must be in order, or it looks very bad.

Queen Victoria during her reign has signed only one death warrant, being averse to capital punishment. There is now no law on the English statute-book compelling her to do so.

An autograph quilt is the latest feminine freak. It consists of a number of signatures written upon squares of linen artistically stitched together with silk.

Prince and Princess Christian have gone to Germany for two months. Princess Christian is to take a course of waters at Homburg, and afterwards proceeds to Darmstadt, Dessau, and Dresden.

Princess Beatrice is to be congratulated upon the narrow escape which she has had while staying in the Schloss Heiligenberg, a fire which originated in the bedroom of the Princess, through her attendant setting the mosquito curtains alight, destroying one wing of the building. The Princess showed admirable presence of mind, and has received no injury.

It is not generally known that the Queen once unsuccessfully aspired to fame as an authoress. She wrote a book, which was sent under a *nom de plume* to a firm of publishers, who declined it with thanks. Their great chagrin on discovering the personality of the writer may be better imagined than described.

The youngest son of the Duke and Duchess of Teck is following the example of his two elder brothers, and will shortly join the Army, for which he has been preparing. He went up for the recent qualifying examination for Sandhurst as a first step.

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown. And if there is one head more uneasy than another it must be that on the big shoulders of the Czar. Not long ago he paid a cousinly visit to Copenhagen. To do so with safety the Russian railways were guarded by soldiers, placed at a distance of twenty yards from each other. Altogether 60,000 soldiers were required to cover the distance. All the villages and towns near the line were closely watched, and every stranger was compelled to give an account of himself.

The Empress-Dowager of China is a woman of character and progressive ideas. She greatly admires the civilization of Western nations and longs to see China in the front ranks. When the Chinese statesmen remonstrated with her because she desired that her son, the emperor, should study English with a tutor, she brusquely informed them that their opinions were not wanted. Whereupon they hastened to bring her, from the College of Pekin, two students to act as teachers, and the young emperor is now busily engaged in mastering the intricacies of the English primer.

STATISTICS.

There are said to be one thousand so-called haunted houses in London.

Only one couple in 11,500 live to celebrate their golden wedding.

The largest nugget of gold ever found weighed 2 020 ounces, and was worth £1,376.

It is calculated that in the year 2100 everybody will have false teeth if the present rate of decay goes on.

A German man of science says that the lands in Germany devoted to grains used in beer production would support fifty million people.

GEMS.

Where there is much pretension, much has been borrowed; nature never pretends.

It is a wise man who knows his own business; and it is a wiser man who thoroughly attends to it.

Envy is no less foolish than detestable. It is a vice which keeps no holiday, but is always working upon its own disquiet.

Laziness grows on people. It begins in cobwebs and ends in iron chains. The more business a man has to do the more he is able to accomplish, for he learns to economize his time.

There are two kinds of unhappy people in the world—those who are sad because they are not known, and those who are miserable because they are known too well.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

Ice Cream with Eggs.—To each quart of milk use four eggs and a cup of sugar, and make into a boiled custard in a double kettle. One pint of whipped cream added just before freezing improves it very much, and in that case three eggs to a quart of milk will be sufficient.

Breast of Veal.—Breast of veal stuffed and roasted is very good. Have the butcher make long cuts between the ribs, and fill these with a stuffing made from four ounces of salt pork, a cupful of bread-crumbs, a teaspoonful of sweet marjoram, a teaspoonful of salt, and a dash of pepper. Roast the same as a loin. The shoulder of veal is nice roasted in the same way. Have the bone taken out, and fill in the space from which it was taken with a stuffing. Skewer the meat together to keep the filling in place.

Strawberry or Cherry Roll.—Make a crust as for pies, but use only two-thirds the usual quantity of butter. Roll thin, and bake in a quick oven until nearly done, but not until crisp. Take it out, spread over the strawberries which have been mashed and sweetened, or stewed cherries, then roll it up carefully. Replace in the oven until it is a delicate brown, then serve with milk or cream.

Fish Pudding.—One and a half pounds of cod or any white fish, six or seven potatoes, one dessertspoonful of dripping, one tablespoonful of chopped parsley, pepper and salt to taste. Boil the fish, and then take out the bones and off the skin. Boil the potatoes and mash them up. Cold potatoes will do quite well, and also cold fish. Boil an egg for ten minutes and chop it up. Now mix the whole together with a fork, stirring in the dripping and a spoonful of the boilings of the fish or a spoonful of milk. Put in the salt and pepper and the chopped parsley, and when mixed put it in a pie dish, and smooth the top and mark it neatly. Put it before the fire to get brown and hot, or in the oven, and it is first-rate.

MISCELLANEOUS.

The leaf of the banana is usually six feet long by two feet wide. The flowers are pink.

The deepest hole in the world is bored at Schladebach, Germany. It is 5,735 feet in death, and is for geological research only.

No bird can fly backwards; the dragon fly, however, can do this, and can outstrip the swallow in speed.

Prior to 1066 the horses of England were never shod, William the Conqueror being the person who is given the credit of introducing horseshoeing in the British Isles.

Bagpipes are generally ascribed to Scotland, where they have been in use for a long time, but it was an instrument upon which the ancient Greeks and Romans played.

It is observed that in antique statues the second toe is longer than the first or great toe, but in men of the present time the reverse is the case.

The custom of shaking or giving hands can be traced to the days of the ancient Israelites, and was intended to signify peace, to swear friendsip, promise alliance, or give security.

Eastern physicians have decided that the small toe of the human foot is a hindrance to locomotion and that it should be removed. In some cases reported all but the great toe have been cut off for the reason that the latter is the only one of any use in walking.

Four cities in Europe stand wholly or in part on Islands. Venice is the best known, on account of its historical past; next comes St. Petersburg, the capital of Russia; and the two last are the cities of Ghent and Amsterdam, situated respectively in Belgium and Holland.

The Chinese think that the inventor of ink was one of the greatest men that ever lived; that he enjoys a blessed immortality, and is charged with keeping an account of the manner in which all ink is used here below, and for every abuse of it he records a black mark against the offender.

It takes five hundredweight of rose leaves to produce one drachm by weight of the best attar. It is, however, seldom procurable unadulterated; and that sold in the bazaars of India owes its scent mainly to sandalwood, from which a cheap oil is easily procured. The best attar is preserved in small bottles made of rock crystal.

Silversmiths now counsel their patrons to keep fine table silver in Canton flannel rather than in wool. The explanation is that the woollen flannels hitherto commonly employed for this purpose are treated, in the course of their production, with a sulphur, and enough of the latter clings to the flannel to tarnish the metal when it is kept in flannel bags.

An interesting question now being agitated is an antidote for an electric shock. An amateur investigator is reported to have found that the insertion of aromatic spirits of ammonia into the body of a bird which had received a shock brought the animal back to life after all signs of animation had disappeared. The subject affords a good field for investigation.

The mortality amongst nurses is far and away beyond the average. A well-known German specialist computes, from an elaborate series of statistical investigations, that "a healthy girl of 17, devoting herself to hospital nursing, dies on the average 21½ years sooner than a girl of the same age moving among the general population." And further, "a hospital nurse of the age of 25 has the same expectation of life as a person of the age of 58 in the general community. The age of 33 years in the hospital is of the same value as the age of 62 in common life." Allowing even a liberal margin to cover possible error, it can hardly be gainsaid that the business of a hospital nurse is, in very sooth, a "dreadful trade."

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

P. M.—There were five executions for the Phœnix Park murders.

Tottie.—The height of the Worcestershire Beacon in the Malvern Hills is 1,395 feet.

Thetis.—The distance from London to Liverpool by water is 705 miles.

Go-ahead.—We do not answer questions for the settlement of bets.

Frank.—If the house was taken by the year six months' notice ending with the date of entry.

Inquisitive.—It is against our rule to give trade addresses.

W. A. B.—Wordsworth wrote the poem "We Are Seven."

Robin Hood.—A gun license of 10s. value is needed for carrying a revolver.

Hugo.—To entitle you to a vote the rooms must be of the annual value of £10 if let unfurnished.

D. B.—Coventry is a city, and also a county borough under the Local Government Act.

Polly.—Lord Salisbury's Government reduced the tax on tea, did not add to the tax.

T. W.—The best course would be to sue the person to whom the clothes were lent for their value.

Chris.—The family name of the Queen is Guelph. She is, of course, an Englishwoman.

Folly.—Imitations have, no doubt, been made in England, but they would be of trivial value.

Rival.—Leicester produces more boots and shoes than Northampton.

Una.—Until he has obtained his discharge a bankrupt is liable to the provisions of the Act.

Karl.—Prince Bismarck was born at Schönhausen, in Pomerania, a province of North Prussia, and belongs to an old Prussian family.

Jonah.—Rents are payable on the day they become due; but cannot be distrained for until the day following.

Nervous One.—The number of persons killed in railway accidents in this country in 1887 was 919; in 1888, 905; and in 1889, 848.

A. P.—A Cabinet Minister who makes a declaration of poverty obtains a pension for life, except when he may be in office again, when his salary takes the place of it.

F. D.—The first steamboat was launched at Dalswinton, Dumfries, in October, in 1788, by Messrs. Miller & Taylor.

S. E. S.—No duty of any kind is levied on grain or bread stuffs imported into this country from foreign countries, except harbour and light duties, which are levied on all ships, no matter what cargo they carry.

Pepper.—Before being a marine engineer the lad must be a practical engineer, serving a legitimate apprenticeship to the business in a shop where engines are made and repaired.

Seth.—A man enlisted at 21 years of age can be made fit for the field in about twelve months, and has then all his vigour within him; a man who has served for twelve years has arrived at middle age, if he is not beyond it, and is not, therefore, a desirable recruit.

Misfortune.—If we are to advise you it will be to remain at home; we really do not know where you could go abroad just now with the certainty of improving your circumstances; yours is a class of labour which is not in demand anywhere.

Weary.—Fatigue caused by brainwork acts as a poison which affects all the organs, especially the muscular system. The blood of dogs fatigued by long racing, when injected into other dogs, makes them exhibit all the symptoms of fatigue.

The Boy.—There are hundreds of situations under the Civil Service; most of them are obtained by passing an examination; for a few of them a nomination is necessary; your first step is therefore to decide which situation you desire to have.

Interested.—It is said that the lives of more than one member of the English Royal Family are insured by various people who keep the premiums paid, and will take the insurance money in the event of its becoming due.

Tom B.—Parliament make their own laws; you will have to wait till we see what the Houses decide to do, but of this you may be sure, that it is quite impossible for them to rise much before the end of August, and they are not likely to meet again till February.

Warlike.—The largest turret ship in the world, perhaps the largest battle-ship in existence, is the British battle-ship *Hood* which was launched at Chatham on July 30, 1891. The *Hood* has a displacement of 14,150 tons.

Housewife.—It is a mistake to wash meat before roasting it. If it has been roughly handled, or if there is a suspicion that it is not all that it should be, it may be wiped all over with a damp cloth; or, if it must be washed, it should be plunged in and out of hot water quickly, and dried immediately. If it is discoloured or there is a slight sign of taint, the discoloured parts should be cut away and the joint washed quickly in vinegar-and-water.

Sentry.—The last public execution, May 26, 1868, was that of Michael Barrett, the Fenian, for deaths caused by the Clerkenwell explosion. The last execution for "attempted murder" was that of Martin Doyle, who was hanged at Chester August 27, 1861.

Bert.—The feet should be bathed once a day, and during the warm weather be rubbed with aromatic vinegar or some toilet water, to which a little alum may be added. Frictions with salt, vinegar, spirits of wine, arnica, and myrrh strengthen the feet and ankles, and prevent them swelling.

Montmorency.—The owner of the dog must take out a license. If he entrusts the dog to another person to keep for him that person would not require a license; but he might be called upon to show that a license had been paid for, and therefore should have the license in his possession.

Troubled.—Pare the heads off the warts and touch them daily with a little acetic acid; they will soon break up and disappear; or without shaving touch them every second day with a bit of lunar caustic, always removing the cinder before retouching; they are a low-lived thing, not at all strong.

Anxious Clara.—We think you should write to the postmaster of the town in which your relatives reside, asking him to be good enough to say whether letters forwarded by you addressed in such a way have been delivered to the person named on them; you may get U.S. stamps to send for reply.

Wants to Know.—If by accident a woman householder's name gets on the register of Parliamentary voters, and she presents herself at the polling station, the presiding officer would, we believe, have no power to refuse to take her vote. Several such cases are said to have occurred at the recent elections.

REJOICE.

Shall I put on the mourner's garb to-day,
When all things round me look so glad and gay?
Shall tears, those closing mists of sorrow, rise
To dim this splendour of the earth and skies?

I ask the balmy summer winds that now
So gently fan and cool my fevered brow;
Their whispered answers lull sad thoughts to rest,
As oil doth calm the ocean's troubled breast.

I ask those tuneful minstrels in the trees
Who gaily sing in such "full-throated ease;"
They all reply, with one according voice,
The time for joy has come—rejoice! rejoice!

I ask the flowers—the tender-hearted flowers—
Those mute consolers in the saddest hours;
Their gracious, smiling aspects seem to say,
Look upward still—all storms soon pass away.

Could I, oh, vanished Spirit, who doth still
My daily life with tender yearnings fill—
Could I this self-same question ask of thee,
Full well I know what thy reply would be.

E'en now, methinks I hear a mystic tone—
A wondering whisper from the vast Unknown;
'Tis like the voice so dear in days of yore,
And seems to murmur, "Mother, grieve no more."

This heavenly something in the summer air
Gives me new strength, beloved, thy loss to bear:
Resigned at last, I look abroad and say,
I will not wear the mourner's garb to-day. M. S. S.

Beatrice.—To retard the appartition of wrinkles, one must keep up an evenness of mind and temper, when this is possible, and after washing, dry the face upward and not downward, as is generally the case, and to avoid crow's feet at the corner of the eyes wash and wipe them from the temples to the nose.

"Good Morning."—All soap applications, even the purest should be entirely rinsed from the skin. Hospital nurses are trained to wash patients first in soap and water, then in clear, very hot water to take off the soap. It is recognised that boiling water is one of the excellent mild disinfectants.

V. D.—The custom of drinking healths goes back to a time when it was the fashion to cut a man's throat while his head was raised. Hence all drank at once. The custom of having the host drink first was due originally to a natural desire to know if the wine had been poisoned. Life in the good old times was not at all monotonous.

Boxes.—There is no trouble about living in the Polar regions except lack of food supply. No danger exists that the provisions once placed would be disturbed. Among the people who dwell in those frozen regions a cache is sacred. Nothing short of starvation will compel a native to interfere with one, and even in such a case he leaves payment behind for what he takes.

Country One.—He is a narrow-minded man who tries to destroy all the birds that eat fruit. Not them alone. The little fruit they eat they earn, because of the insect enemies they destroy. Try and raise enough for yourself and the birds too. That is better than indiscriminate butchery of birds that it would be a calamity to see banished from our fields, gardens and mustards.

B. G.—A publican is, in regard to the sale of his liquors, in precisely the same position as the grocer, baker, butcher, or draper in regard to the sale of their goods; that is to say, he can sell or positively refuse to sell to anyone; his license lays him under no obligation whatever to the public, though a belief to the contrary is widely prevalent.

H. C.—The Prime Minister, as such, receives no salary. If he is Foreign Secretary also, he draws £5,000 a year while in office. If First Lord of the Treasury, as Mr. Gladstone was in 1880-85, he receives the same. Statesmen out of office receive no pay. Each of the Cabinet Ministers receives a salary of from £3,000 to £5,000 a year.

Minister.—Ministers remain in office until dismissed by the Sovereign, or their resignation is accepted by the Sovereign. At a dissolution they cease to be members of Parliament, but they do not cease to be Ministers. If not re-elected they have no place in the House of Commons, and some other Minister would have to answer questions for the absent Minister.

Tormented.—Corns and bunions never appear on a foot accustomed to be well *chaussé* and daily bathed. But should there be the slightest indication of a coming corn, rub the hardened part with a corn-scraper, or with the nail. The corn will not then take root, and the pedicure's services will never be needed. Well-made shoes and daily bathing will prevent corns.

Soldier.—Germans are bound to serve from 17th to 39th year, three years with colours, four with reserve, and remainder in militia; Austrians serve from their 21st year, three years with colours, seven in reserve, and ten in militia; in Italy, the total period of military service is nineteen years; infantry are four years with colours, four in reserve, and remainder of time in militia.

Language.—The Japs are by no means the unsophisticated beings you imagine them—they are generations ahead of the Chinese; and if they do not trade as freely with Europe as we would like, it is because the Yankees contrive to get ahead of European traders in the Japanese markets; you are not to suppose that we have the field to ourselves; as for the language, you don't need it; your English will carry you through.

Old Reader.—Fiasco is an Italian word signifying a little bottle, and the change wrought in the signification whereby the word has come to be applied to a failure in any undertaking has its origin in the trade of glass-blowing. When beginners undertake to blow, however earnest and arduous their efforts, they can only blow a pear-shaped bulb or little bottle, and only after having made many fiascos do they succeed in transforming the glass at the end of the blowing-tube into other shapes.

Querist.—All sounds, whether high or low, loud or soft, travel precisely the same rate—i.e., about eleven hundred feet a second. Were this not so the different notes of music would reach the ear at different times, and the result would be confusion instead of melody. If the sun gave forth sounds loud enough to reach the earth, such sounds, instead of reaching us in the space of about eight minutes, as light does, would only arrive after a period of nearly fourteen years.

L. M. C.—Probably the foundation walls of the house were laid in common mortar, and without due care as to the firmness and closeness of the stone. If the leaks are not too bad, a thick coating of mortar made of equal parts of best Portland cement and clean, sharp sand will be of great benefit. With this, coat the inside of all walls and the floor, making it extra thick at the base of the wall, and taking care to crowd it under the wall wherever the water has dissolved or disintegrated the mortar.

Twice Wrecked.—A captain is expected, in honour and in fulfilment of his duty to his employers, not to abandon his ship until all others are safely out of her; but this is only in a case where there is time and opportunity for the safety of others; he would not be bound to remain in the rigging of a sunken ship till all others there managed to get safely away on bits of wreck that floated by; nor would he be expected to let himself be sucked down by his foundering vessel in order that his companions might have time to spring clear; his duty to his employers ends when discipline can do no more and individual effort supervenes; his duty to himself and to his wife and children then comes into play, and compels him to spring at once.

M. M. M.—The *Great Eastern* was built originally for the Australian passage, the design of her builders being to construct her so that she should be able to carry coals enough to last her over the entire voyage, and thus do away with the delays inseparable from putting into ports on the way to re-coal. She was to contain 12,000 to 14,000 tons of coal, 5,000 tons of measurement goods, and 4,000 passengers; her launching weight was 10,000 tons the registered tonnage, but with everything on board she weighed about 25,000 tons; she failed to realize the speed expected of her, however, and that put her out of the Australian run; her employment as telegraph cable ship was merely what might be called a happy accident."

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